

# The Downfall of the Gods

Villy Sørensen



Translated by Paula Hostrup-Jessen

Illustrated by Michael McCurdy

"Sørensen's paraphrase of the Old Norse stories is highly entertaining. His cleverly naïve style may remind one of Hans Christian Andersen's at its best. I find the translation to be of impeccable quality."—Niels Ingwersen, University of Wisconsin–Madison.

In the Eddas, *ragnarok*, or the downfall of the gods, is the end of the world, a time of wolves, serpents, fire, earthquake, and colossal war. Villy Sørensen has rewritten the mythology of the ancient Nordic world from the perspective of our century, highlighting the personalities and symbolization of the Norse gods to reflect our own crises of value and belief. His novel, originally published as *Ragnarok* in 1982 in Denmark, will win new acclaim in its English translation by Paula Hostrup-Jessen.

*The Downfall of the Gods* begins with stories of charm and enchantment that introduce the major characters. At first they are ingenuous and amusing; then their relationships heat up. Odin, the chief of the gods, who rules by a system of surveillance and ambiguous decrees, is preoccupied with preparing a massive army to aid the gods in a final battle for control of the world. Opposing him in the gods' council is Balder, who argues that the very preparation for war—with its bloody exercises, deceptions, and betrayals—hastens the catastrophe. There are Loki the shape-changer, half god and half giant, who alone may travel between Asgard, home of the gods, and Utgard, home of the frost giants; Freyja, goddess of love, who criticizes Odin for his war-mongering; and others. On the other side are the giants, ready for revenge but never quite able to figure out why the gods insist on enmity; and caught between are human beings, generally forgotten in the quarrels on high. Far more than a striking literary exercise, this book has the dark wit to make us realize that the apocalyptic vision of *ragnarok* looms before us.





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## The Downfall of the Gods

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Ragnarok

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Translated

by Paula

Hostrup-

Jessen

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With an

afterword

by Villy

Sørensen

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Illustrated

by Michael

McCurdy

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## Gods and Giants

Once upon a time there was a world that was governed by superior beings who called themselves Aesir, and whom human beings worshipped as gods (they had no other gods in those days). The fact is that the Aesir were bigger and stronger than human beings, and they possessed a divine gift – no matter how old they became, they never aged. They themselves insisted that they had been there since the dawn of time – why, even that they had created the world and the people in it. Of course there was no one who could remember that, so the people could do no better than to believe what the Aesir – the gods – said.

There were also other beings who were even bigger than the gods and called themselves giants, or rather frost giants. They could also become very old, but they couldn't stay young indefinitely, and so finally they died. The frost giants insisted that they had been there before the Aesir – why, even that the whole world had originally been theirs and that the Aesir had stolen it from them and changed it all.

So the frost giants now lived at the uttermost ends of the world beside the ocean in a gigantic country called Utgard. Utgard largely consisted of rocks and wasteland and dense

forests, and the frost giants lived on the fish in the water and the animals in the forest, for there was no fertile land in Utgard. The fertile land lay in the middle of the world, in Midgard, which the gods had given to human beings. They cultivated the earth and put their cattle out to grass; they sacrificed the animals and fruits of the earth to the gods, and that was what the gods lived on.

In the heart of Midgard on a large plain surrounded by lofty mountains – the Plain of Ida – the gods had built their own castle, which was known as Asgard. Thus the home of the gods was very difficult to get at. When the gods themselves had to travel back and forth they used to drive up and down the rainbow. Beside the rainbow bridge, just where it touched Asgard, was the house of Heimdall, the watchman of the gods. He could see a hundred miles in front and a hundred miles behind and could hear the grass grow, and the frost giants couldn't take him by surprise. Should they come he would blow his mighty horn Gjall, which could be heard all over the world. But he blew it only when there was real danger afoot, for if you have such good hearing as Heimdall, piercing tones like that make your ears ache.

It was necessary to be on one's guard against the frost giants. They were not content with living at the edge of the world, but wanted more room and more land; not only because they were so big, but because there were so many of them. There were many more giants than gods – the giants kept on producing giant children, whereas the gods had stopped producing god children. No one knows quite why. Some people think that the senior gods were afraid of losing their power if new gods kept on being born – and, true enough, there is a limit to the number of gods people can manage to sacrifice to. Others think that the gods were no

longer able to produce children – that the apples they ate in order to retain their youth had this side effect. The fact is that the gods were not immortal – for then they would still have been alive today. They could be slain in battle, but could not die of ill health or old age – so long as they remembered to eat their health-giving apples.

The reason why the gods could maintain their power over the frost giants, even though there were fewer of them, was that they were cleverer – and better armed. They had as servants some dwarfs who were the cleverest smiths in the world and had forged a spear-that-nothing-could-stop, which went straight through everything it hit, a sword-that-could-swing-itself, and a hammer-that-always-hit-the-mark and returned to the god that swung it. Such weapons had no equal, and so each had its own name. The spear was called Gungnir, the sword was called Skrap, and the hammer, Mjollnir. But the dwarfs also made more commonplace weapons, and so many of them that there were not enough gods to use them. Therefore the mighty gods planned to raise an army of human beings so that the many weapons could be put to use.



## Gods of War and Gods of Love

Even though the gods never grew any older they were not all the same age: Odin, the chief god, was the oldest. He could remember everything that had ever happened and he knew everything that was going to happen. He had drunk from the spring of wisdom before it dried up, and at the dawn of time he had pledged an eye in exchange for all the wisdom in the world. But with his one eye he could see more than all the others. Right at the top of his castle, Valhalla, he had a lookout seat called Hlidskjalf, which was hewn into the loftiest mountain peak in Asgard; from there he could see the whole world and keep an eye on the giants. And what he couldn't see he heard about: he had two ravens, Huginn and Muginn, who were for ever flying round the world and coming back to whisper what they had heard in his ear. Sometimes Odin himself set out for Midgard, either riding his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir – then everyone could see who he was – or disguised in a great cloak, his big floppy hat concealing the eye that wasn't there – then not many people recognized him.

Odin's wife was called Frigg. She too knew a great deal, but Odin never consulted her, because he himself knew ev-



everything. He never told her what he knew, and they seldom spoke to one another. Should Odin seek advice from anyone, it was from three other goddesses, the Norns, whom Odin had entrusted from the start with shaping the destiny of men. The Norns lived on their own in the Holy Grove that lay in the middle of Asgard, and they spoke to none other than Odin.

Odin and Frigg had five sons – from the time when goddesses still bore god children. They were called Thor, Tyr, Bragi, Hod, and Balder. The two eldest were gods of war. One god of war should really have been sufficient, and it seems that Odin had originally intended Thor to be the god of war and Tyr, the god of justice. But Tyr was not content with that, and the two god sons were always fighting, until their mother, Frigg, persuaded Odin to make them both gods of war. Thor was to be the god of savage fighting and Tyr, of more organized battle. But the difference was not very great, and the two gods often disagreed as to who should do what. When human beings were at war with one another – which they frequently were – Thor and Tyr often supported opposite sides in battle.

So it was the youngest son, Balder, who became the god of justice; he was not so martially inclined. Nor was Bragi; he preferred playing the harp to swinging the sword, and so he became the god of poetry. But Hod, who was blind, didn't become the god of anything. Balder didn't think this was fair, and he often confided in Hod and sought his advice.

There were also gods of another type: they came from quite a different family who called themselves Vanir. The Aesir and the Vanir had quarreled with one another, but that was a long time ago and they disagreed about what had really happened. The Aesir said they had beaten the Vanir

in battle, but the Vanir said they had not put up any fight; they had of their own free will declared themselves willing to be made gods. Njord became the god of fertility on earth and in the sea – but he was more interested in the sea and lived far away on the rocks where the ocean washed the shores of Asgard and a storm was always raging. His son and daughter, Freyr and Freyja, became gods of love, but, unlike Njord, Freyr also attended to the fertility of the earth. Freyja was the goddess of the gentle love that is usually called tenderness; Freyr was the god of the hot-blooded love usually called passion – but they liked working together.

The Aesir had blue eyes and fair or red hair – though Thor was the only one with red hair, and he also had a red beard – while the Vanir had dark hair and brown eyes. But Freyja had golden freckles. She was easily moved to tears, and her tears were of pure gold.

The gods did not always agree, and especially about one matter, which was therefore taken up in the Council of the Gods. The gods used to sit in council under the big ash tree that grew in the heart of the Holy Grove that lay in the middle of Asgard. Odin himself sat on the biggest stone in the council place; his wife Frigg sat opposite him, and Thor and his wife Sif were on his right. Sif never said anything; when she did, Thor immediately spoke louder, so she held her tongue. Opposite them, beside Frigg, sat Freyr and Freyja. On Frigg's right sat Njord and Balder and, opposite them, beside Odin, sat Tyr – and Loki.

Loki was neither As\* nor Van and neither dark nor fair – he had originally been a frost giant, and that was still noticeable, even though it was such a long time since he had

\* As is the singular form of *Aesir*; Van is the singular form of *Vanir*.

gone over to the gods that no one remembered it, except of course Odin himself. Whereas the gods usually regarded the giants as much stupider than themselves, the gods were scarcely a match for Loki. Besides, Loki could do something they could not, although some of the giants could. He could change his shape, and turn himself – and others too – into various animals; and so the gods were a little afraid of him. But they made use of Loki's shape-changing talents and sometimes sent him out to spy on the giants in the guise of a bird – some of them even suspected the giants might be using Loki for the same purpose. Maybe Loki felt that the gods didn't quite accept him because he was half giant, and that was why he so often teased and mocked them. But it could also have been the other way round – that they were cross with him because he was always teasing and mocking them. Frigg didn't think Loki should be allowed to take part in the Council of the Gods, to which only the senior gods were admitted, but Odin vouched for him.

The fact was that Odin had decided that men who fell in battle shouldn't go to Hel, the realm of the dead, which lay far beneath the earth and where the dead were only pitiful shadows of themselves. He had arranged with the Norns for fallen heroes to be brought up to his own Valhalla, where there was room enough for them. For Valhalla had 540 doors, and 800 men could march abreast through each door. On the square outside the warriors were to continue their martial life, fighting each other from morning to night until they were all slain. But since they were already dead they couldn't really be killed – they picked themselves up and took their seats at the banqueting tables in the hall until they all fell down again – this time from feasting on pork and drinking ale. The next morning they took up the fight

once more. Odin had formed a corps of subordinate goddesses known as Valkyries; they were to collect the dead from the battlefield – but only if they had fallen with honor and had not been killed from behind. It was the Valkyries who waited on the dead in Valhalla. It was a fabulous life for dead warriors, and the prospect of such halcyon days after death made it especially attractive for men to die in battle. This was an arrangement that satisfied the gods of war – both Thor and Tyr.

But not the gods of love! Even Freyja, who was usually so gentle, could become quite enraged if she felt that human beings were being treated unkindly. And she thought it unkind that only warriors should enjoy life and blissful days after they were dead. This was discrimination, and it was unfair to women and children and all the others who led peaceful lives and died of ill health or old age:

‘We shouldn’t incite men to make war,’ Freyja said.

‘But to make love,’ mocked Loki.

‘... and we shouldn’t reward people just because they die in battle,’ continued Freyja.

‘... but not many people die of love,’ Loki continued.

Sif was about to say something, but Thor shouted that this was the worst female drivel he had ever heard. If the gods were to attend to *all* the dead souls they’d soon have too much to do and no time to attend to the giants! The warriors in Valhalla would have to be worth their salt if it came to a war with the frost giants – there would be no use then for weaklings and dotards and women and children.

‘Does that mean,’ Balder asked, ‘that we are so feeble that we can’t stand up to the giants without the protection of human beings?’

He glanced at Odin, and so did they all. Odin seldom said

very much in council, but let the others do the talking – it was he who had to make the decisions. Since he didn't answer, Balder continued:

'... and are we so feeble that we cannot manage with the help of those men who are living down there now, but have to furnish ourselves with dead warriors?'

Odin still said nothing. So it was Tyr who answered:

'The men down there would run away as soon as they saw a giant. The warriors in Valhalla, who are being chopped down daily, would display quite a different disregard to danger. But if we promise those who fall in battle a merry life in Valhalla we strengthen the fighting morale of the living. If we were to treat all men equally after their death, we would weaken that morale.'

Balder glanced at Odin again, who still kept silent. Then Balder said – though not very loudly, as if he were afraid Odin might hear:

'If the giants are really so much stronger than we are, we could ask whether this is the right way of fighting them.'

'That's what I say,' said Freyja. 'The more we make war on the giants, the more warlike they become. We should try to make it up with them ...'

'Make love to them!' sneered Loki.

'... and we shouldn't just think of ourselves,' Freyja continued, 'but also of the human beings. The way we go on about their having to protect us, one would think they were gods for us. It's we who are supposed to protect them.'

'That's what I say,' said Thor. 'If I didn't thin out the giant spawn with my hammer, the giants would be in Midgard by now.'

'And the more you thin them out, the more there'll be, because they still – make love!'

There was a painful silence among the gods: the great problem was that the gods, who numbered so few, didn't grow in number. But Freyja was so distraught that golden tears streamed out of her eyes:

'So now you've decided that human beings, who are so many, are to protect us who are so few. But think how they set about growing in number. Not by making war on one another – that would only make them fewer. So we shouldn't incite them to go to war by collecting dead warriors.'

'Man lies better in bed than on the battlefield,' said Loki. But Odin, who usually uttered words of wisdom when he finally did say something, declared:

'Violent passion often turns sages into fools. Let me hear what you think.'

'I agree with Freyja,' said Freyr.

'So do I,' said Njord.

'I agree with Thor,' said Sif.

'I agree with myself,' said Thor.

'So do I,' said Tyr.

Odin glanced across at Frigg. She didn't quite know what to think, except that she *ought* to think the same as Odin. As Odin's wife, she was the goddess of marriage, and she didn't think there was any need for goddesses of love other than herself. But as a goddess of love, she had much less to do than Freyja: she didn't receive nearly as many sacrifices and prayers from human beings, and it annoyed her. She didn't think Freyja ought to be a goddess of love when she didn't even have a husband. It was rumored that Freyr and Freyja were children of their own aunt, that their father Njord had begotten children with his own sister – a custom said to have been general bad practice among the Vanir. *Before* they became gods, of course! But it was Odin himself

who had made Freyja the goddess of love, thereby passing over his own wife. When Frigg thought about *that*, she was equally furious with Odin and Freyja.

'I agree with Odin,' she said.

Odin looked at Balder.

'One could call it unfair,' said Balder, 'that all the fallen warriors go to Valhalla . . . '

'Yes,' Loki interrupted. 'It would be fairer if only half of them went to Odin in Valhalla and the other half went to Freyja's hall, Folkvang.'

'Good,' said Odin, 'The most important thing is unity among the gods. Freyja and I will share on the battlefield; she will get half of the slain. The meeting is hereby closed.'

At this Odin rose with dignity, while Thor and Tyr jumped up, looking very angry. Opposite them stood Freyr and Freyja, looking quite amazed. They had won a kind of victory, and not until afterward did it dawn on them that the hope of going to Freyja when they fell in battle would scarcely make men less warlike.

But Balder realized that immediately and glanced at the chuckling Loki – who instantly stopped chuckling.

'Remember,' Loki said to Balder, 'that Odin knows everything that will happen. And so he must also know that the great army of dead warriors is necessary – in order to avert the downfall of the gods.'

In the gods' own tongue the downfall of the gods was called 'Ragnarok.' It was the most sinister word in their language.



## Idun and Her Apples

In the Holy Grove in Asgard there was also an orchard, and in the orchard grew an apple tree, the apples of which only the gods were permitted to eat. Those who ate the apples acquired eternal health and youth. This was a divine quality, and the gods were not interested in letting others – human beings, let alone giants – share the same advantage, for then they would become like gods.

The giants insisted that those who ate the apples of the gods never really grew up, as the giants themselves did – but they were probably just envious. Of course there was nothing the giants would have liked better than to get hold of the apples – and preferably the whole tree. In that way they could deprive the gods of their youth and maybe even safeguard themselves against old age and death. So the orchard was well guarded: only the senior gods might enter it, and not even they were permitted to pick the apples. For on one occasion – a long time ago – Thor had eaten too many apples and been unable to control his own strength. So now only one god was allowed to pick the apples, store them during the winter, and hand them out to the others. That was Idun, the goddess of youth and health – and she looked like it too.



Whenever Bragi, the god of poetry, gazed at her, it seemed as if he were seeing visions; he plucked his harp and sang of her beauty, and Idun blushed so that her cheeks came to look like her apples. Idun seldom left her orchard; she had plenty to do there and it was more beautiful than anywhere else. She rarely took part in the Council of the Gods, and Bragi – who was loath to let her out of his sight – didn't either. He was not very interested in politics anyway.

One day when Idun was alone – Bragi had left her in order to write a song about his longing for her – Loki came to her with a bag of red apples. Loki was always on the move – he could fly like a bird and run like a hare – and in a forest not far away from the land of the frost giants he had seen an apple tree that reminded him of the one growing in Idun's orchard. The apples looked just the same too, and Loki had tasted them the previous day. Since then he had not grown a day older, and he began to suspect that the forest apples possessed the same power and effect as Idun's.

Idun looked at Loki and at the apples; Loki looked at the apples and at Idun. They didn't say anything, but Loki knew what Idun was thinking: 'What if the giants should get hold of such apples! But can I trust Loki?' Idun didn't know what Loki was thinking. He said:

'I haven't told anyone but you. There's no reason to frighten the other gods – without cause. It's up to you to decide. You know all about apples.'

He handed Idun an apple. So she took a bite and stood for a while, tasting it:

'It tastes – more or less – like my apples.'

'That's what I thought,' said Loki, 'even though I'm not an expert like you. But we musn't be hasty. We had better put it to the test. I'm willing to be the guinea pig. For the next ten days I'll eat the apples I've brought with me, and I

shan't eat any of yours. If I don't notice any difference, then *you* must decide what to do about it.'

And that is what happened. Loki ate his ten forest apples; after ten days he returned to Idun, and she had to admit – even though she didn't say so – that she had never seen Loki looking younger or more handsome. And although she thought highly of youth and beauty – it was of course her profession – she was not pleased to see him. She felt it a blow to her pride that apples grew in other places too – apples just as rare as hers, so that her apples were no longer so rare. 'You musn't tell the others,' she said to Loki.

'Upon my honor,' said Loki. 'We can keep it a secret, as far as I'm concerned; we have enough with your apples. It's just that ...'

Loki grew silent and looked worried. This time Idun knew what he was thinking – at least she thought he was thinking the same as she: 'It's just that ... that if the giants discover those apples ...'

She said: 'If the giants discover those apples, and they really *are* my apples – which have seeded themselves ...'

She said no more. But Loki continued:

'... then it will be the downfall of the gods.'

Once again he used that terrible word "Ragnarok," and Idun repeated it, looking as if she had got poison in her mouth. Bragi, who couldn't stand Idun being out of his sight for very long at a time, came rushing up; he couldn't bear to see Idun looking worried and intended to have it out with Loki. But Idun told Bragi she was too busy just then. She had never said such a thing to Bragi before, and Bragi went sorrowfully away to write a lament about unrequited love and the pangs of jealousy. Idun said to Loki:

'Couldn't we uproot the tree and plant it here?'

'Of course we could,' said Loki, 'but then Thor would have to help us.'

'No,' said Idun. 'Whatever Thor knows, all the gods know. I want to have a look at the tree myself. You must fly me there.'

'Certainly not,' said Loki. 'It's much too dangerous. Not the flight itself, I mean – that's pure enjoyment. But what if the giants were to see us?'

By now, Idun, who usually spent all her time in her orchard, had set her heart on going out flying and seeing other apple trees. As the goddess of youth and health she was not usually timid, nor was it easy to refuse her, so Loki had to comply with her wish. The next morning, after Idun had given the gods their apple ration and sent Bragi out on an errand, they set off on their journey. Loki changed himself into an eagle and, in order to make it easier for him to carry her and not so easy for the giants to spot her, he changed Idun into a wren.

No sooner were Loki and Idun in flight than their spirits rose, and they larked around just like human beings out traveling. Loki didn't take the shortest route, for now that they were out in the big world he wanted to show Idun something of it, and they – or at any rate, she – almost forgot what a serious mission they were engaged in. When they finally reached the tree, Idun – with her eye for apples – could see at once that it was quite a different kind of apple tree. This made her even more excited, for now there was no danger at all. But when she looked at Loki, who had changed from an eagle into divine shape, she couldn't understand how he could look so handsome when he hadn't been eating her apples for days. Had he been fooling her

after all? Or was he merely incapable of growing old, no matter what he ate?

Loki knew what she was thinking. He laughed.

At that moment the sky darkened – until then it had been so bright that from up in the air they had been able to see right across to the land of the frost giants. Now a heavy cloud was gradually descending on them, and – in a twinkling of an eye – Idun had disappeared. The cloud turned out to be a giant bird, and once again Idun was flying – although this time on her way to Utgard. It was of course a giant in the disguise of a gigantic bird who had carried Idun off. Loki could turn himself into an eagle just as much as he liked: he couldn't catch up with the bird. Idun had vanished, and Loki was reluctant to return to the gods with that message.

Bragi was the first to discover Idun's disappearance. He broke out into loud laments, and all the birds in the orchard joined in. The gods each got a shock when they came to the orchard next morning and Idun was not there. Of course, just this once they could help themselves to the apples, but they had lost their appetites and, inspecting one another, they saw how tired and listless they had suddenly become. The apples in themselves were not sufficient when the goddess of health and youth had disappeared. This was a pretty pass, and the gods held a council on the spot without first moving to the council place under the ash tree.

Who had been the last to see Idun?

Bragi had been the last to see her – with Loki!

The gods all looked at one another, and Odin came down from Hlidskjalf in person and regarded them all with his one eye. From Hlidskjalf he had seen a giant bird fly off with a great booty to the land of the giants, and his ravens had

informed him that Loki and Idun had left Asgard in the guise of birds. At this, everyone shouted for Loki, and he slunk up like a dog that expected a beating. But when he saw their angry looks he drew himself up and met their gaze – each one in turn. Then he told them about the apples in the forest, and said that for twelve days he had only eaten forest apples and was feeling fine, whereas the gods, who had been eating Idun's apples, looked as if they were on the verge of collapse. He also pointed out that Idun had been absolutely determined to see the apples in the forest with her own eyes. Possibly she thought that he, Loki, had picked them from her own tree, for the gods seldom believed what he said.

Then the gods, and Thor in particular, shouted that Loki was obviously not to be trusted, that he was not a true god but in league with the giants, that he ought to be taught a lesson once and for all – and Thor reached for his hammer. But Balder said:

'Who can bring Idun back to us?'

Then they all grew silent, for they knew that only Loki could do that.

'I'll try,' said Loki.

'And if you don't bring Idun back with you, don't come back,' said Tyr.

'That would be the downfall of the gods,' said Loki, walking off. The gods knew he was right. But they didn't know whether he meant that the gods would perish without Idun – or without Loki himself.

They were as good as useless now that both Idun and Loki were gone. They felt weak and defensive, always on the alert. Heimdall stood at the rainbow bridge, prepared to blast his horn; Odin sat up in Hlidskjalf, keeping an eye on

the whole world and especially on Loki, who was in flight again – in the shape of a falcon, for a change. Odin also kept a lookout for Idun, but the giants had hidden her so well that he couldn't spot her. He felt quite weak from old age, now that the apple goddess had disappeared – after all, he had been there since the dawn of time – and he sat nodding, finding it difficult to keep his eye open. But all at once he raised his head and opened his eye wide: he saw a falcon come flying from Utgard with a nut in its talon, and far behind – the same great bird he had seen before. It was the giant who had carried Idun off and from whom Loki had snatched Idun away – for the nut in its talon was plainly Idun. But the gigantic bird was catching up with the falcon, which was smaller, and Odin gave orders to his servant, Hermod, who rushed down and kindled a bonfire just inside the gate of Asgard's fence. Loki, with his falcon-eye, would spot that at once and know he was to fly over the fence; but the giant, who didn't know the place and whose sight was scarcely as good as Loki's, flew in by the gate, the flames leaping up around him. It was a terrible sight to watch and terrible to hear, for the giant bellowed loudly until he was choked by the smoke.

The falcon delivered the nut in the apple orchard; all the gods flocked around Idun, and no sooner had she handed them their apples again than they livened up and got rosy apple-cheeks. Bragi sang a joyful ballad, and Loki laughed.

In one night Idun had grown many years older and wiser, but you couldn't tell by looking at her. She told Bragi about her stay with the giants: they had treated her kindly, but she had not seen the light of day – how dreadful that had been! But then Loki had slithered up like a snake and turned her into a nut – how strange that had felt!

'You must never go flying with Loki again,' said Bragi.

'But he has saved my life,' said Idun. 'And your life too – if it's true that you cannot live without me.'

Bragi didn't much care for that answer. He set about his harp – as if this time Loki had changed himself into a harp.

Shortly afterward a horseman with helmet and coat of mail and bow and arrow arrived at Asgard. Odin and Heimdall had seen the rider a long way off, but since he was alone they had let him pass. However, when the rider drew near, it turned out to be a young giantess. She said her name was Skadi, she was the daughter of the great giant Thiazi whom the gods had recently slain, and now she demanded vengeance.

When Thor saw it was only a female giant he dropped his hammer. She should regard it as a great act of mercy to be allowed to ride home again the way she had come, said Thor, and Sif would have said the same.

Tyr advised her to be quick about it too. Her deceased father had abducted a goddess and received his just deserts. There could be no question of vengeance.

Then Skadi said that her father Thiazi had had an agreement with the gods which had been shamelessly broken. Thor reached for his hammer, but thought better of it and looked around for Loki – who wasn't there. But before he could say anything, Balder began to speak:

'If you demand vengeance now, then we too would have to demand vengeance and then you'd have to demand vengeance – and that would be taking things too far and wouldn't get us anywhere. Reconciliation is better than strife.'

Skadi said he had taken the words right out of her mouth and this was why she had come. The giants were peaceful at

heart and wished only to live in peace. So, as a token of peace between the giants and the gods, her father, who had been a widower (for her mother was dead), had wished to marry a goddess –'

She was interrupted by the outraged murmur of the gods. But Skadi continued at the top of her voice – and she had indeed a giant's voice:

'... but the goddess Idun was shamelessly abducted from the land of the giants. However, I wish to make it up – and I'm prepared to take one of the gods for a husband.'

At that the gods murmured even louder, and Thor almost shouted. But Skadi shouted louder still:

'If you don't agree to the proposal, we shall demand vengeance and I shall raise a giant army.'

Not even goddesses usually displayed such virility, and the war god Tyr, who had been unable to find a sufficiently belligerent wife among the goddesses, glanced at her with respect. Balder noticed this. Once again he said that reconciliation was better than strife, and asked if there was an unmarried god who would be willing to wed Skadi as a token of peace between the gods and the giants. At the same time he glanced at Tyr, who was looking at Skadi. But Skadi was looking at Balder.

Now Balder was undoubtedly the handsomest of the gods, and almost blinding in his fairness. Skadi, who was among gods for the first time, had never seen such a handsome god, and she said she wanted to marry Balder.

Balder paled and grew even fairer – blinding Skadi all the more. Thor laughed loudly, but someone was laughing still louder: it was Loki, who had suddenly appeared. Thor stopped laughing at once and wanted to hear what kind of arrangement Loki had made with the giants on the sly. For



once Balder agreed with Thor and wanted to question Loki in order to get out of the tight squeeze he had got into. But Loki wouldn't listen to them. He knew of a good game, he said. All unmarried gods were to take off their shoes and army boots and pull sleeping-bags over their heads so that only their bare feet were visible. Feet were the wisest of all – they always remained on the ground, whereas heads were usually full of crazy ideas, so Skadi ought to choose a god by his feet alone.

Odin would never have permitted such a thing, but he was sitting up in Hlidskjalf taking stock of the world situation. Frigg, who was the goddess of marriage, said that there were too many unmarried gods – 'and goddesses,' she added, glancing angrily at Freyja. But Freyja flashed Frigg one of her sweetest smiles and said:

'Marriage without love is nothing for gods – or goddesses. If the feet to which Skadi proposes refuse her, then she must give up her marital demands – and her other ones too.'

The gods thought this was fair and, strangely enough, so did Skadi. She thought she could easily tell Balder by his feet, and couldn't imagine that Balder, who seemed so friendly, would refuse her. Loki had already fetched the sleeping-bags, and – while Skadi was being blindfolded – Balder and Tyr, Freyr and Njord, and Loki himself pulled them over their heads. When the blindfold was removed Skadi looked at the toes of the gods and didn't take long to make up her mind: resolutely, she grabbed Balder's big toe.

But it wasn't Balder! When the sleeping-bag came off, the big toe turned out to belong to Njord, the rich sea god, who had been living alone ever since he had become a god. But he was still as young and handsome as a god, though not equal to Balder. Balder was relieved and Njord felt flattered

at having the most beautiful feet; he thought Skadi was a plucky young giantess and had good taste. If Skadi was disappointed, she didn't show it; now at least she would be a kind of goddess and a stepmother to the gods of love. Freyr and Freyja embraced their old father and their new mother, and the wedding became a celebration of peace between gods and giants, even though no other giants than Skadi were present – that would have been too risky.

The marriage was unhappy. Njord and Skadi were very different and had different habits. Njord was accustomed to living beside the sea – in his rocky hall Noatun – and Skadi was used to the great forests, and each of them felt unhappy where the other was happiest. Njord couldn't stand hearing the howl of the wolves, and Skadi couldn't stand the screech of the sea gulls. For a time they lived turn and turn-about, first in the forest and then beside the sea, but then they separated and lived each on their own; though they still used to meet – especially when the gods gave parties. But Njord never visited the giants in Utgard. That was no place for a god.



## The Wolf and the Serpent

The Fenrir wolf and the Midgard serpent are the two greatest monsters that have ever been. But to start with they were small, and that is why the gods didn't immediately realize what a great danger they were. They didn't know where they came from – suddenly, there they were, in the grove in Asgard; it was Tyr who discovered them, playing together. On its stiff legs, the wolf cub jumped up clumsily at the serpent, which rose on to its tail – mind you, it *was* all tail – and, hissing, it darted tiny tongues of flame at the wolf. Tyr, who was usually a lonely and morose god, found the strange animals amusing; other gods joined him and also thought them funny. Laughing, Loki said:

'Yes, children are always sweet!'

Balder, who never laughed, was more serious:

'But they don't always go on being sweet.'

He fully realized that it was no ordinary wolf cub, nor was it an ordinary serpent child. The serpent was yellow like a wolf and the wolf had zigzag stripes like a serpent, and both of them had a piercing gaze that made your eyes smart. Then Thor too became uneasy.

'They're probably giant spawn,' he said, reaching for his hammer. 'Just let me at them!'



'No, that would be a pity!' shouted Freyja. And Tyr, who had been the first to see the animals and thought he understood them best, said:

'How could giant spawn turn up in the middle of Asgard?'

Balder looked at Loki, and so did all the others. Loki didn't look at anyone. He had his own peculiar way of not looking at anyone.

'And even if they were giant spawn,' Tyr continued, 'they now belong to us, and if they grow big and dangerous it's to the giants they'll become a danger. They simply must be properly trained.'

'Haha!' said Loki. 'The secret weapons of the gods!'

At that moment Odin too came down from Hlidskjalf and inspected them carefully. He said.

'If you meet with evil, then know it as such. Leave not your foes in peace!'

And with these words of wisdom he stalked off. The younger gods didn't know how to interpret them, and if ever they questioned him, Odin usually replied: 'A wise man can himself provide the answer to what he asks. Otherwise, call him not wise.'

Balder and Thor thought Odin believed that the animals were wicked creatures and should be treated accordingly. Tyr thought they should be used against the enemy.

'We can always wait and see how big they grow,' he said.

'Then it will be your responsibility,' said Thor. 'You must see to it that they are properly trained.'

Tyr immediately set about training the animals. He called the wolf cub 'Fenrir,' and it was not long before it knew its name and came when he called it. And he did this all the time; everywhere you could hear Tyr shouting, 'Fenrir! Fenrir! Come here, little cub!' – and hear the wolf howl.

At first it was barely a whine, but then – as the days passed – a louder and louder howl, which sounded most unpleasant.

It was an even greater problem with the serpent. Tyr named it 'Jormundgand,' but it never learned to answer to its name, and perhaps this was not so surprising. It used to creep about wherever it pleased, and soon it was impossible to keep track of it. However, that soon became possible again, because it grew so big that it couldn't hide away any longer. Every week it grew twice as long as the week before. For the first few weeks this didn't matter so much, but in the long run it became something to reckon with. When the serpent found its way to Idun's apple orchard and wound itself around her apple tree, Idun said that if they didn't get rid of that serpent she wanted a different job. Its breath was poisonous – anyone could smell that – and she couldn't promise that her apples wouldn't become diseased.

'I'll smash that giant child's skull,' said Thor. Tyr said they could do whatever they liked with the serpent – it was unruly and didn't even know its own name. But they were not to interfere with Fenrir. It did what it was told, and he had even taught it to speak. Should it grow big and unmanageable, he could always put it on a lead.

'I'll smash that serpent's skull,' said Thor. But Loki said the serpent didn't have a skull – it was soft all the way through – and Thor would risk getting his hammer stuck in it, so he couldn't get it out again. Besides, the serpent was full of poison, and if Thor succeeded in making a hole in it, all the poison would stream out. It would be safer to drown the serpent – if they were to avoid the shedding of blood and poison in Holy Asgard. Odin nodded his approval, and so it was Thor who had to lug the serpent away; he was the only one able to lift it, but he had to put on iron-spiked gloves in

order to get a firm grip on its slimy body – which tried to wind itself around him and choke him. He had to climb right up onto the faraway rocks where the ocean washed the shores of Asgard. And on his way he kept snorting with rage about the frenzied serpent whose poisonous jaws he had clamped shut with his iron fist – and about the foolhardy gods who had cherished a serpent in their bosom.

But in the Holy Grove in Asgard Tyr was still running around with his Fenrir. It made an excellent watchdog, he said. Balder shook his head, and Loki laughed.



## The Giant Wall

It was part of the gods' business to journey to Midgard and interfere, when necessary, in the affairs of human beings. Naturally, the gods used to listen to humans' prayers, but they couldn't possibly fulfill them all, for all the different people didn't exactly pray for the same things. In time of war both sides used to pray for victory, and before battles they usually sacrificed to Odin as the chief and mightiest god. There was a time when Odin used to visit the battlefields of men on his eight-legged horse Sleipnir and put heart into both sides, but recently he had lost much of his desire to travel. He had noticed that those who lost in battle also lost faith in him and began to sacrifice to Thor instead. Now, when two armies were fighting one another, it often happened that one side fought in the name of Thor and the other in the name of Tyr. This turn of events was somewhat unfortunate, but on the other hand Odin didn't like to see men become too peaceful and easy prey for the giants. He himself often used to set their chiefs up against one another, but he had never reconciled them.

Odin had also grown tired of listening to people's prayers – for he always knew what they were going to pray for.



He had handed over the supervision of temples and sacrifices to Njord, and now Njord and his children were more concerned with human beings than Odin and his sons were. As a rule, Thor only used to drive *through* Midgard in order to go out and smash the giants' skulls. He drove at break-neck speed in his chariot, which was drawn by two billy-goats whose hooves struck up sparks from the ground, and the people usually shouted 'hurrah' when they saw him. Tyr never went to Midgard but sent a deputy instead; Bragi couldn't tear himself away from Idun, who had been forbidden to leave Asgard. And Balder shunned the company of humans, even though he was fond of them and they of him. But Freyr used to ride out all the year round in order to follow the change of seasons and the growth of the plants; he rode on his golden boar, which took such long strides that it looked like a sun flying over the meadows. And Freyja was the one who most frequently drove down to earth; her chariot was drawn by two cats – enormous cats that could really trample the ground.

Odin noticed that Freyja shed many golden tears, and he realized that she still didn't feel quite at home among the Aesir. He had tried to be nice to her, but she was not easy to satisfy. He thought she was a bit too kind to rather too many humans, but whenever he sat in Hlidskjalf he used to turn a blind eye on what Freyja was doing on earth.

But now Odin had grown apprehensive about letting Freyja drive out of Asgard, and with good reason. The last time he had ventured out, a giant by the name of Hrungnir had stopped and asked him what kind of a monstrous horse it was he was riding – it would be sure to stumble over all its eight legs if it ever attempted to gallop. Now, Hrungnir's own horse, Golden Mane, was quite different: it had four

legs like a horse should have, and could run twice as fast on those as that hack could on eight! This was idle giant-boasting, of course, and instead of responding to this blasphemy Odin had put Sleipnir into a gallop and charged over sea and sky. But Hrungrir set after him on Gold Mane and, even though it couldn't catch up with Sleipnir, the giant's horse was not to be stopped – not even by the gatekeeper at Asgard. Now that Hrungrir had already entered the gate, the Aesir tried to be friendly and even poured out some ale for him. But was too much for him the gods' ale, and no sooner had he drunk his fill than his mouth became full of big words: he would seize the whole of Valhalla and transfer it to Utgard, he would raze Asgard to the ground and kill all the gods – he would take only Freyja away with him, because she was sweet.

Fortunately, Thor had come home and he drew his hammer. Hrungrir shouted that giants would never dream of using arms against unarmed persons, but it would be just like Thor to practice that kind of villainy. If Thor dared, Hrungrir would challenge him to an honest duel. But as soon as he sobered up he appeared to regret what he had said, for when the giant had to face Thor he became so terrified that he wet his trousers and fell with a crash when Thor threw his hammer. And that was that. But Odin realized that the words that spilled from the giant's mouth came from the fullness of his stony heart – it was the giants' sinister plans he had accidentally revealed! So it would be out of the question to let Freyja leave Asgard; they would have to build up Asgard's defenses against a giant invasion.

As luck would have it, a master stonemason turned up with an offer to build a wall around the whole of Asgard within three years; it would be absolutely solid and impen-

ettable – and especially high in places where there were hidey-holes in the rocks. Asgard covered a very large area that stretched in among and up and down the lofty crags, and the gods hadn't thought it possible to build a wall around it all. They had made do with a wooden fence. But after the giant Hrungnir had penetrated right into Asgard on horseback, they realized that the wooden fence was inadequate and that a wall like the one the mason proposed would be an advantage.

'The giant brood keeps on spreading,' said Thor.

'But with a wall like that and Fenrir as watchdog at the gate we should be safe from all the giants,' said Tyr.

Even Heimdall, who was attending the council meeting that day, thought that such a wall would make it easier to keep watch. But Balder said:

'You are talking as if the giants might attack us at any moment. But it is we – you, Thor – who are attacking *them*. Are gods not stronger than giants?'

'But the giants outnumber us,' said Thor, 'and they are up to all kinds of tricks.'

'And that wall is probably a trick too,' said Balder. 'If a man can build a wall like that, then he's no man but a giant.'

'At any rate, no ordinary man would offer to build such a wall without payment,' said Loki. 'There must be something fishy in it.'

So they asked the stonemason what he wanted for building the wall. He said he wanted Freyja for his wife. At this the gods laughed heartily.

'A very human wish,' said Loki, who laughed the loudest. 'It shows how fond of Freyja human beings are. And you are fond of them, aren't you Freyja? If he makes such human demands he is certainly no giant.'

'We've just had a giant here with the same wish,' said Freyja angrily.

'Well, who doesn't love Freyja – and who doesn't Freyja love?'

'Not you!' shouted Freyja, with golden tears in her eyes.

'So you can do without me, can you!' sneered Loki. 'Then why don't you move to Midgard with your mason here? You spend most of your time down there anyway.'

Freyja blushed, and her freckles sparkled:

'A goddess of love ought not to belong to one person alone.'

'But only to everyone!' said Loki. Frigg said:

'A goddess of love ought to be married.'

That was too much for Balder, even though Frigg was his mother:

'Ye gods,' he cried, 'are you seriously thinking of – bartering Freyja?'

'By no means,' said Loki, 'but it's an amusing thought nevertheless. Incidentally, you could make such strict conditions that he couldn't possibly fulfill them.'

Freyja and Freyr, Njord and Balder didn't think there was anything more to discuss, but the other gods still went on discussing. Only Odin didn't say anything. Loki said:

'Make it a condition that he must build the wall by himself and within a year, or else there's nothing more to discuss.'

So the gods made that a condition. The stonemason said he would agree to it provided he might use his stallion, which was called Svadilfari, to haul the stones – if he had to haul them all by himself it would take two years longer.

Freyja was greatly upset to learn that the gods were willing to barter her for a wall, and so was Balder. They spoke together a lot that year.

The mason set about his work and made rapid progress. Both he and his stallion Svadilfari worked at such a rate that it made you quite dizzy to watch them. Every day the wall was a great deal longer. The gods of war looked enthusiastically at the long wall that not even Thor could shift. But the building had only been going on for a few days when Balder realized how it would all end, and he tried to make the others break the agreement in time; they couldn't break the agreement after the wall had already been completed, for then how would human beings ever be able to believe in the gods?

'This is no man,' said Tyr. 'Men don't possess giant strength like that.'

'If it's a giant, it's a dirty trick, and we're not obliged to stick to our agreement,' said Thor.

'Then the giants wouldn't have to stick to any agreement with us either,' said Balder.

'They don't do that anyway,' said Thor.

But now the year was almost up and the wall was nearly finished. Freyja wept and complained that almost all the gods had let her down. But they could have it their own way – she would follow the mason to Midgard and never set foot in Asgard again.

Then the war gods had second thoughts after all, and they held an emergency council. This time they put the blame on Loki: it was he who had made them negotiate with the mason, and now he must get them out of the mess he had got them into. It was he who had carried off Idun, and now – it seemed – he was going to help them carry off Freyja too. They had had enough of his trickery; if he didn't succeed in thwarting the giants' wicked plans, Thor would smash his skull with his own hammer.

'And then what will you do without me?' asked Loki. To

this they made no reply. Odin said the most important thing was for the gods to stand together.

As Svadilfari came hauling the very last stones for the gigantic building operation, a black filly suddenly came trotting up and pranced right in front of the stallion, which had been slaving away for months on end and now felt like doing something quite different. So it cast off its stones and charged after the filly – and never showed itself again. The year was now up; the time had expired. The mason flew into a giant rage and threw the remaining stones at the gods. Now they could see he was a giant and a deceiver and, without any hesitation, Thor took hold of his good hammer Mjollnir and smashed the giant's skull.

The gods rejoiced – or at least most of them did. Freyja, who had most reason to rejoice, was trembling all over, and Balder shook his head. If gods broke their agreements and resorted to tricks, they were no better than giants. Though no one said so openly, they all realized that it was Loki who had changed himself into a filly and seduced the stallion Svadilfari. Later on, some even insisted that Loki had given birth to a foal.

But now the wall was standing – and it was an easy matter for the gods to complete the last little bit.

'What would you do without me?' asked Loki.



## Balder's Dreams

One night, when Balder woke up, he lay for a long time, deathly still and imagining he was in Hel, the underground realm of the dead. The thought of death was unnatural for a god who had been living for (what humans would call) centuries. He could neither remember nor forget what had happened, and he tried to forget and remember it at one and the same time. And at the very moment he realized that he had been killed, he also realized that it was something he had dreamed – he was in his own hall, Breidablik in Asgard, and not in Hel among the wretched ghosts. But he felt quite dazed, and throughout the following day he was unable to carry out his duties as a god.

He saw his brothers in a new light that day. Thor and Tyr had a different point of view than his own, but he had never doubted their good intentions. Now he was suddenly angry with Thor, who was always wanting to smash the giants' skulls; with Tyr, who was always fooling around with that sinister-looking wolf; and with Bragi, who was always singing but never spoke a sensible word. Only in Hod, who never said anything, and whom the others ignored because he couldn't see, did he suddenly see more than he had before. The dream had left him with a feeling that made him see

things in another light. When he met Loki he became aware of feeling something for him he had never felt before – though he didn't know what it was.

The next night he had the same dream, and the same again the following night; and the dream became no less sinister because he was already familiar with it. As long as a dream lasts it is real, and things that happen in dreams will take place somehow or other in reality – in those days everyone thought that.

On the fourth night Balder kept himself awake for fear he would dream again. But when he tried to keep himself awake on the fifth night too, the visions crowded before his eyes, and when he closed his eyes on them he drifted back into the dream. Every morning he felt still weaker than the evening before. After a while it became apparent, and his mother Frigg grew anxious and asked him whether he had remembered to eat his apples. Idun gave him more apples than she gave the others, but these could only keep him alive in real life – not prevent him from getting killed in dreams.

The only god who couldn't see any change in Balder was Hod, and to him Balder related his dream:

'We are in the Holy Grove in Asgard, under the ash tree. Everyone is feeling happy, as if a great danger has been averted – a danger that especially threatens me. Everyone embraces me and they all form a smiling circle around me. But suddenly Thor starts throwing something at me, and then all the others throw something too. Of course, *you* don't throw anything at me, dear brother, and neither does Loki; he stands beside you explaining what is going on. To start with it's only for fun, and Tyr throws with his left hand alone – he *has* no right hand – and Freyr doesn't use his



sword. They throw only stones and clubs and axes, and I am not scared – it's as if I know it is only a dream. Everything glances off or turns away before it reaches me, and my mother stands there smiling. Then my father takes hold of his spear-that-nothing-could-stop, and I stop it, and Thor takes his hammer-that-always-hit-the-mark, and it doesn't hit me. But Thor seems to be getting annoyed; he becomes redder and redder in the face and hurls with greater and greater force, and all of them throw at once; the air around me is thick with axes, spears, and swords, and I shout for them to stop. And suddenly I feel a pain in my chest, and I fall – and wake up, thinking I am in Hel. I dream that dream every night.'

'How dreadful,' said Hod.

'Do you think they hate me?' asked Balder.

'No,' replied Hod. 'They – we – love you, all of us.'

'Perhaps they have some reason to hate me,' whispered Balder. 'How can I think such things – imagine such things about my brothers?'

'It's just a dream.'

'What is a dream? Even if it isn't the truth but only imagination, it's still *my* imagination, and who, then, am I?'

'Everyone says you're the best god of them all.'

'Then we're lost,' said Balder. 'You musn't tell anyone. Perhaps the fact that I have told you my dream will help.'

That evening Balder went to bed early. But when he woke up in the night he lay for a long time paralyzed with fear, until he slowly came to some kind of life again. He was not afraid of being in Hel, but of not existing at all. Only after some while did he feel that his head, arms, and legs and the whole of his body really existed. With difficulty, he got to his feet and noticed that everything around him –

Breidablik, Asgard – was there as usual. It had only been a dream.

But what a dream! A dream that remained like a great hole in his head through which all his thoughts poured out. All day long he walked about like a sleepwalker, speaking to no one – it was fortunate the gods held no council that day. In the evening he expected the worst and was again too frightened to fall asleep, but he was so exhausted that he could scarcely stand upright, and he felt as if he were falling into an abyss where the walls were made of serpents' bodies and the bottom, of wolves' jaws – and when he came to himself again he had once more to drag his thoughts laboriously out of the abyss where everything had perished.

Ragnarok! A sinister word the gods used, and Loki used quite frequently. But for Balder, despite everything, it had only been a word – just as death had only been a word. But now both had become reality, and what had otherwise been reality was now unreality, had lost its colors and sounds of life and become a world of shadows; as if Hel, the realm of the dead, had risen up above ground and into Asgard itself – Asgard, which had seemed so safe, surrounded by a giant wall, watched over by Heimdall, protected by thousands of dead warriors, by Odin's spear, Freyr's sword, and Thor's hammer. In the dream this had not been sufficient. Would it be enough in reality, which was no longer as real as it was before?

In the dream he had ceased to be himself.

He was nowhere and yet everywhere.

He was nothing and yet everything.

He was beyond everything that was happening, and yet it was in him and to him it happened.

Everything shakes, everything shakes apart – in the body, in the world.

A wolf so big that its gaping jaws can bridge earth and heaven is swallowing the sun.

A serpent so huge that it fills the entire ocean ranges up over land, spewing venom and fire, so the earth starts to burn.

In Asgard the ash tree is torn loose by quakes and set on fire, its blazing branches spreading all over the world and tearing down the stars.

Heimdall sounds his horn, louder than the thunder of heaven, the warriors from Valhalla stagger out on to the Plain of Ida; but giant birds, winged reptiles, and fiery dragons fill the air and swoop down on the plain, alighting on the warriors and crushing them to death.

Down in Midgard people swarm out like ants from devastated anthills, the army of giants advances over them and up the rainbow, which collapses behind them.

The wolf strides up into Asgard, and the serpent rises up on its tail, buries its fangs in Odin's Hlidskjalf, and hauls itself up.

The mighty gods are very small; they stand like black shadows against the burning sky.

Odin hurls his spear at the wolf, which swallows the spear and Odin with it.

Tyr raises his arm against the wolf, but it is his left arm; his right arm is missing, and now he loses the left one too.

Freyr has lost the sword-that-could-swing-itself; he fences in vain with the towering giants.

Thor hurls his hammer at the serpent and smashes its head; the venom gushes out of it, and Thor reels and falls to the ground.

The ash tree has turned into smoke, Asgard turns into smoke, the ocean washes up over Midgard.

The giant birds rise up, their wings afire, and vanish like sparks in the smoke.

This dream Balder did not reveal to Hod. Hod, who saw nothing, was still living in a world that stood firm, and Balder hadn't the heart to shake it.

Once having entrusted it to Hod, Balder stopped dreaming the dream about his own death. But the dream about the downfall of the gods – of the world – kept on returning. In whom could he confide? Who would believe him?

If the visions he saw in his dream were simply created by his own terror, he wasn't much of a god if he had such dreams, and he felt ashamed.

But if the visions were true, he wasn't much of a god if he didn't dare tell anyone.

At night, when he was too frightened to sleep, he went out walking in the forest. The stars were still twinkling, and he thought he saw a pair of animal eyes gleaming in the starlight. Something rustled in the bushes and he flinched, thinking it might be the wolf about to jump at him – and suddenly, there stood Loki in front of him, saying:

'So Balder the Good is not sleeping well. Are you having bad dreams? Do you dream about me?'

'No,' said Balder. Loki laughed.

'You are so pale and fair that one can see right through you.'

Balder couldn't see right through Loki. Loki was the very last god he would confide in. And yet Loki was the only one of them – apart from Hod – who had not wanted to kill him in his dream. Loki knew something the others didn't

know – apart from Odin, of course. He also seemed to know something about Balder.

‘You’re afraid of something?’ continued Loki. ‘It couldn’t be me, I suppose?’

‘No,’ said Balder. But he was so engulfed in the fear from the dream that he was unable to hide it. Without intending to, he said:

‘How do you think it will all end?’

‘It? All things end with the end. Ask Odin, your father – he knows everything that is yet to come.’

Loki spoke aloud what Balder himself had been thinking. Odin knew everything. For a moment Balder tried to comfort himself with that thought.

But if Odin knew the end was like this, why did he do nothing to avert it? Why did he simply let the wolf grow – like a growing danger?

But if he *didn’t* know . . . then Odin didn’t know everything, and what kind of a god was he then?

But of course Odin knew everything, and if he did nothing to prevent things from coming to such a bad end, it was because – things were not going to end so badly. It was merely he, Balder, who was seeing visions.

‘Loki,’ he shouted – but Loki had vanished into the darkness.

Balder too would have liked to vanish into the darkness, but in his darkness there was a raging furnace – a world aflame.

All things end with the end. With Ragnarok.





## The Wolf Is Put on the Lead

Njord, who was responsible for fertility in the sea, received more and more complaints from the fishermen; they said that a sea serpent was eating the fish in the sea and poisoning it with his venom. Complaints soon began to arrive from all shores, so either there were sea serpents everywhere – or else one big serpent that was gradually filling up the entire ocean.

Njord brought the matter up in the Council of the Gods. The gods had a strong suspicion that the serpent Thor had drowned had not been drowned after all – it had been like drowning a fish. They reproached one another – and Loki in particular – for not having been more foresighted. When at last they stopped talking, because they didn't know what to say, Balder said:

'And what about the wolf?'

At this everyone looked at Tyr. But Tyr said that that was a different matter. Fenrir didn't eat fish and did no harm. He did what he was told and was open to persuasion.

But Fenrir had grown rather big – already as tall as Tyr, even though he was only a puppy. Like all puppies, he was playful and liked to jump up at the gods – and especially the

goddesses, a couple of whom he had knocked down. Tyr himself had said he would put him on a lead if he became violent – and now violent Fenrir had become.

Tyr didn't think it was necessary, but all the other gods, and especially the goddesses and Balder, thought it was. Tyr said there was no leash strong enough to hold him. The others said that in that case there was all the more reason to put him on a lead. But no ordinary lead would be sufficient for such an extraordinary wolf, so they had an extraordinarily strong chain made, which was given a name of its own – Laeding – because there existed no other chains of that caliber. But Tyr refused to fasten the chain around the wolf's neck, and the others were not too keen either; Thor said it would be better to knock off the wolf cub immediately.

At that, Loki himself volunteered. He told the wolf that he knew of a good game: here was a chain that Thor himself wasn't able to break, and Thor was so strong that you could hear his muscles crackling even when he relaxed. Now they would see if Fenrir was stronger than Thor.

Fenrir was completely taken in. Howling and wagging his tail with delight, he stretched out his neck. Loki put the chain around Fenrir's neck and Thor fastened it to a rock. No sooner had Fenrir flexed his muscles – and not even all of them – than the chain snapped. For the gods there was nothing to do but put a good face on it; they applauded the performance. Only Tyr was favorably impressed, and said:

'What did I tell you!'

So the gods made a new chain, which was named Dromi and was twice as strong. It was the strongest chain that had ever been made, they told the wolf – and that was true enough. If Fenrir could break it he would become very fa-



mous. And Fenrir wanted to be famous. Once again the chain was put around his neck. He bounded around for a while, for the chain was quite long. Then he tensed his muscles – and the chain shattered into hundreds of pieces, hitting several of the gods and making them wince with pain. But once more they were obliged to look enthusiastic, and Tyr had never been so impressed: that wolf would be a match for any giant, he said.

But the others realized how serious the matter was. They sent word to the dwarfs in their armory and gave them to understand that now they would really have to excel themselves and make a rope that was quite *impossible* to break – even if it were used in a tug-of-war between gods and giants. The dwarfs put all their other jobs aside and set to work. But days and weeks went by, and in the meantime the wolf was growing, and the gods and especially the goddesses viewed Fenrir with increasing anxiety. It took such a long time because the dwarfs had to obtain some very uncommon materials to make the rope, whose name was Gleipnir. It was made of the trample of cats, women's beards, the roots of mountains, the breath of fish, and birds' spittle, and everything of that nature was used up in the process, so that Freyja's cats could no longer trample the ground. Gleipnir was as supple and smooth as a silk ribbon, though otherwise looked quite nondescript. But Thor, who could easily have broken both Laeding and Dromi had he wanted to, couldn't tear Gleipnir in two.

This time the gods meant business, even though they still let the wolf believe they were only playing a game. They all sailed across to a small island far out in a lake, as if they were going on an outing; but they really intended to get rid of the wolf. Tyr went with them, but he was not on

speaking terms with the other gods, who saw to it that he had no chance to speak to Fenrir.

Once on the island, they fastened the ribbon to a very strong boulder known as Gjoll; then they called Fenrir, who still responded to his name. But when he saw the silk ribbon Gleipnir, he turned up his snout and snarled that they had no need to come with a bit of thread like that.

So now the gods were in a great fix. On the one hand they had to make it clear to the wolf that the ribbon was stronger than it looked; on the other, they couldn't tell him just how strong it was. But Fenrir, who had proved that he was stronger than Thor, realized their predicament and said that if they were going to bind him with that ribbon, then the ribbon must be stronger than it looked and there must be a catch in it somewhere.

Anyone could hear that Fenrir had not only learned to speak, but was also brighter than normal for his age. He had discovered they were afraid of him – that was all they had achieved. Then Loki tried to see what he could do:

'If we find you can't even break a thin thread like this, we don't need to fear your strength and we'll let you loose at once.'

'Then it makes no difference whether I break it or not; I'll be free in either case, so why must I be bound?'

'Precisely,' said Tyr, nodding at his pupil. 'Let's stop while we're ahead.'

But Loki asked Fenrir whether he was really so timid. This infuriated the wolf, and it howled:

'Who is the more afraid! You are afraid of my strength, and I of your cunning. If I'm to take a risk, then you must too. If one of you will put your hand inside my jaws, I'll let myself be bound and we won't have to accuse each other of lack of courage.'

But now the gods were in a still greater fix. They knew that if they didn't manage to bind Fenrir now, they never would. They looked at one another, but dared not voice their thoughts aloud.

And as they usually did when they were in trouble, they looked mostly at Loki, as if he were the one who ought to give them a hand. But Loki shrugged and said that it was not he who had been responsible for the wolf's education.

At this, Tyr went straight up to the wolf and put his whole arm inside its jaws – his right arm at that. Apparently he didn't think the wolf could be bound with the ribbon, nor that it would bite his arm off. The others stood perfectly still, staring at him. Balder shook his head; Tyr shook his head too, but most probably for a different reason.

'Get on with it!' he said, snarling almost like a wolf.

So Fenrir was bound for the third time – this time with Gleipnir. Fenrir tensed all his muscles and also the rope, which became all the stronger the more it tightened; then froth slavered from the wolf's jaws – and suddenly also blood from Tyr's arm, which he had bitten off. With his left arm Tyr felt for his right one, which was no longer there. In his rage Fenrir became completely entangled in the rope and howled with gaping jaws. Thor rushed up and wedged a sword inside the wolf's jaws so that it could no longer bite people's arms off. It could just stay there and die of starvation.

The gods said nothing as they sailed back from the island, and they scarcely dared look at Tyr. Tyr's eyes were full of tears – something they had never seen before. Was it because he had lost an arm or because he had lost his wolf?

Balder wrung his hands to stop them trembling. Now Tyr had only one arm – as in his dream!



## Freyr's Love

Odin had forbidden Freyja to leave Asgard. It was much too dangerous. The giants had stolen far into Midgard in great numbers, and were only awaiting their chance to abduct her.

Freyja wept golden tears of sorrow and indignation. A goddess of love who didn't take part herself in mens' happy and unhappy love affairs, but sat high above them administering love relationships – that wasn't Freyja.

'It's because he hates love,' she said to her brother Freyr. 'Love between human beings. Love between humans and gods – or a goddess. And love between gods.'

'Not to mention between gods and giants,' said Freyr.

Freyr, who still traveled to Midgard on his wild boar named Golden Bristle, hadn't seen anything of the giants when he had ridden over the fields. He and Freyja spoke – or rather whispered, so that Odin's ravens couldn't hear them – about how strange it was that Odin wouldn't allow anyone to climb up into Hlidskjalf. He probably had his own good reasons – but what reasons? Was it because no one else must be allowed to see what he saw? Or because there wasn't anything to see and Odin just saw what he wanted to – and what he wanted the other gods to believe?

The latter was a blasphemous thought, and Freyr and Freyja were quite frightened at having thought it aloud – or almost aloud. Once having thought it, however, they couldn't get it out of their heads. And one day, when Odin had finally decided to ride off on Sleipnir-with-the-eight-legs, Freyr entered Valhalla and, when he was quite sure nobody could see him, he stole step by step up into Hlidskjalf. The higher he got, the more his knees gave way under him. He knew Odin was out, but he couldn't quite dismiss the idea that he might still be standing there.

When he finally reached the top he was so exhausted – or perhaps terrified – that everything went black before his eyes. He stood there blinking for a while, but finally he opened them wide. What a view! He could see the whole world in one glance. Odin had not been lying – a presumptuous thought that Freyr was now ashamed of.

Apart from not being able to see through the rocks and walls and whatever might be hiding behind them, Freyr could see everything. First he saw his sister Freyja, who knew he had climbed up there and couldn't help following him with her eyes, even though she couldn't see him at that distance. But he was able to look her straight in the face, as if she were standing before him. Freyr hadn't thought of that – from Hlidskjalf Odin could also keep an eye on the gods – and he was not even sure that Odin's eye, like Odin's spear, couldn't see through everything: rocks, walls, and coats of mail, and right into human – and godly – hearts.

He looked down into Midgard, rejoicing over the green and golden fields, and he was quite taken with all the people moving about in them. But when his gaze fell on Utgard, he instantly lowered it – and then slowly and cautiously looked up again. *That* he hadn't realized – that Utgard stretched so far along beside the ocean, and that the land of

the frost giants was so miserable and barren. And yet the giants were in such countless numbers, and all crowded together into giant cities consisting of great clumsy buildings of rock. And what a sight the giants were! They didn't look like gods, not even like big men; some were as tall as towers, others as wide as barns – a good target, but probably impossible to slay. Some of them had animal heads, some had many arms, some had wings and seemed to be engaged in practice flights. Others were scuffling about wildly on the ground in great crowds, but they were possibly only children playing – so violently that gods would never be able to join in. They were lucky to have the giants so far away, and only now did he realize what a good thing it was that the giant wall had been built. Faced with this great danger, the gods would have to stand together. Up there, he came to see things as Odin saw them – Odin really did have a broader outlook than the others!

But as he was looking in awe and amazement from one giant to the other, he caught sight of a large house in the middle of Utgard, which was easily a match for the gods' own houses. And then the door opened and a young giantess came out, and the light that shone from her illuminated the whole of Utgard. Everything that had hitherto seemed gloomy and ominous now became lustrous and friendly – even the hideous giants became beautiful in their own way, and the vulgar giant children, sweet. Freyr blinked – unable to believe his own eyes; but the young giantess looked just as dazzling, until she went in by another door and everything was as gloomy and ominous as before.

Was it sorcery – a giant illusion? Or was it a punishment for his having dared to take Odin's place? Freyr came down to earth again in a flash.

There stood Freyja:

'What did you see?'

'I saw everything.'

'So you *can* see everything from up there? Even with two eyes?'

'I saw it all.'

'Tell me!'

But then they saw a black raven come hovering over them. It had seen Freyr in Hlidskjalf, of course, and now wanted to hear what he had seen. Freyja stopped talking, but Freyr said:

'Odin is right – when you see it from his point of view.'

Freyja thought he said that just in order to deceive the raven. But Freyr continued at the top of his voice:

'Odin ought to let all the gods climb up into Hlidskjalf so that they could see things – and giants – as he sees them.'

Now Freyja didn't know what to believe, and Freyr said no more that day and the next day, and not only because the ravens were listening. He saw things in a different light now that he had seen them from above, and he felt a greater and greater desire to go up there again. He had almost forgotten how terrifying Utgard had looked at first glance – it was not the panorama of Utgard, not even the whole world, that he wanted to see again, but solely the young giantess who had thrown light on the world. He thought he could understand why Odin dared not let the others go up into Hlidskjalf. What if they should see that a giant was also a kind of – not human, not god, of course, and yet. . . .

Some of the light Freyr had seen the world in still shone in his eyes. At first surprised by her brother's silence, Freyja looked him straight in the face and asked:

'What did she look like?'

'Regarding his sister with astonishment, Freyr noticed the same radiance in her, and said:

'She looks like you. But how could you . . .'

'Oh Freyr, you've been a god of love from time immemorial and you haven't even known what it's all about until now. Up here, where every god has his own castle, it's not so easy to find out.'

There was nothing Freyr wanted more than to talk about the young giantess who had shed light on the world, and now he told Freyja everything – also about how strong the giants were. It would be impossible to conquer them. They would have to live with them in peace and friendship . . .'

' . . . and love,' said Freyja. She had hoped that something good would have come out of her father's marriage to a giantess, but of course their marriage had come about rather awkwardly.

'Gods don't have god children with gods,' said Freyja, letting fall a tear.

Freyr understood what she meant and was thinking the same. He would ride to Utgard at once and woo the giantess, and he jumped on Golden Bristle's back. But at the gate beside the rainbow bridge he was stopped by Heimdall: Odin had issued instructions forbidding the gods to leave Asgard. The ravens had probably been whispering in his ear.

Freyr was speechless with indignation. Later he said not a word in the Council of the Gods, whether in silent protest or because his thoughts were elsewhere. Afterward his father Njord asked him whether he had remembered to take his apples. Loki asked him whether he had bad dreams. Or sweet dreams – for they can be almost as bad.

And then Freyr did something he normally never would have done – he confided in Loki. For Loki was the only one who could journey to Utgard. He drew Loki into the inner-



most chamber of his castle, Alfheim, where the ravens couldn't enter, and told him about the young giantess he had seen and whose name he didn't know. . . .

'Gerd,' said Loki.

'Gerd?' said Freyr, for the first but not the last time.

'Gerd!' repeated Loki. 'I know indeed what the loveliest of giantesses is called. She has many suitors among the giants; she has probably already got married while you've been walking around suffering.'

'Loki!' shouted Freyr. 'You must go – I mean, fly – to Utgard at once and say –'

'I know quite well what to say,' Loki interrupted. 'But you can't reckon on Gerd accepting a god she has never seen. You must let me take something with me to show that your intentions are serious.'

Freyr fished out three of Idun's apples. He hadn't felt like eating or living at all – without Gerd. Now Loki was to take the apples to Gerd and say –

'I know quite well what to say,' interrupted Loki. 'I don't think any young giantess would say no to living among gods in eternal youth.'

Freyr was even about to throw his arms around Loki, but dropped them again as the latter said:

'But her father and the other giants are not very likely to let her go. They don't much care for gods. They'll probably throw me out of Utgard if I go in my own shape, and I'm obliged to do that in order to appear credible. You're going to have to lend me your sword, so that I can defend myself.'

'My sword!' cried Freyr. It was of course Freyr who owned Skrap, that sword of all swords, which could swing itself. After Thor's hammer, it was the gods' best weapon – but it was not used very much.

'You don't use it anyway,' said Loki. 'What does a god of

love want with a sword? Can you think of a better sign of peace than to come with a sword?’

Freyr thought it over. The sword belonged not only to him but to all the gods. But he didn’t hesitate for long. If Odin had forbidden him to leave Asgard, then Odin must take the consequences. He fetched the sword, whispering:

‘Make sure nobody sees it.’

But Loki was already far away. To Freyr, time seemed to drag. Every night he wandered, sighing, in the Holy Grove, and every night he used to meet Balder. They didn’t speak to one another; black ravens were hovering above them.

On the third day Loki returned with Gerd, who caused a great stir among the gods. She on her part couldn’t resist Freyr – and fell straight into his arms. As soon as Freyr let go of her for a moment, Freyja embraced her new sister-in-law. Njord too embraced his daughter-in-law – his wife Skadi was not at home. Even Thor was about to embrace Gerd, but was held back by Sif; and Tyr, who had only one arm, couldn’t embrace anyone.

Then Loki made a short speech and said that Gymir, Gerd’s father, sent his regards. Loki was to say that he and the giants regarded this connection between the giants’ greatest treasure and one of the greatest of the gods as a sign that there was henceforth to be peace and friendship between giants and gods and that now they would not continue to live apart for ever.

Not all the gods welcomed this speech. Thor and Tyr and Sif said that Gymir had probably misunderstood something. But Loki hadn’t finished: Gymir had understood that the gods desired peace with the giants, and that it was as a sign of peace that Freyr had given his sword in exchange for his love.

'Sword!' shouted all the gods, looking at Freyr. But Freyr was shouting too, and looking at Loki.

'The sword,' said Loki, looking at Freyr and smiling. But Freyr was not smiling.

'Perhaps that is something *I* have misunderstood?' asked Loki. 'Perhaps the sword is more valuable to you than your bride? Very well, then, the deal can be called off. Let's fly!' he said, grabbing hold of Gerd. But Freyr snatched her away from him, and when Thor and Tyr shouted for the deal to be called off, he glared at them defiantly, as if he would set on them even without a sword. A fight appeared to be brewing, but at that moment Odin came down from Hlidskjalf carrying his spear:

'Stop!' he shouted, striking the ground with his spear. 'If gods start fighting gods, that's the end. Gods are stronger than giants unless gods side with giants. Gods are weaker than giants if gods are of more than one mind. Giants do not call off a deal that is to their advantage. It bodes evil when others wish to take my place.'

Whereupon he departed in anger and half the gods followed him. Thus Freyr's and Gerd's wedding became only half a peace celebration. Only Freyr's own family attended, with Loki – and Balder.

But Balder wasn't able to share in their joy. Now Freyr had lost his sword – just like in his dreams!



## Thor's Journey to Utgard

Thor was angry. He was ashamed of the gods because they had let themselves be deceived by the giants. The giants – from Loki – must have gained an entirely wrong impression of the gods. Probably they imagined that all gods were like Freyr and Freyja. He'd teach them otherwise. He would journey to Utgard in person and give them a good lesson. He couldn't fly like Loki, to be sure, but he possessed the world's fastest billy-goats, Tooth Grinder and Gat-Tooth (they were brothers), and he had already harnessed them to his chariot when he realized that he didn't know the way, and he grew still angrier at the thought that Loki was the only god who was acquainted with Utgard and its surroundings.

There was no way out – he would have to take Loki with him. He shouted for Loki, but Loki was in a bad temper, having just been told off by Odin. If the gods didn't appreciate his great services, that was up to them. He wouldn't travel to Utgard in a goat chariot, and he advised Thor not to do so either. He wouldn't get away with it in Utgard – if he got away at all.

That was almost the worst thing he could have said to Thor. The latter sneered: if Loki refused to cooperate, then

he would show himself to be the giant he was. Anyway, for everyday practical purposes it was he, Thor, who was the leader of the gods – Odin was usually up in Hlidskjalf – and Loki had to obey Thor. He could either travel with him or go to Hel.

'That comes to the same thing,' said Loki.

'Very well,' said Thor, 'you may come with me solely on condition that you keep your mouth shut. It's me who's going to do the talking!'

'Then no good will come of it,' said Loki.

'Shut your trap! If you don't keep your mouth shut of your own accord, I'll get the dwarfs to put a lock on it. Then you won't be able to eat.'

'Have you remembered to take some provisions for the journey?'

'I'll see to that. And it would be best if you changed into a nice young servant immediately – the giants mustn't be able to recognize you. And no shape-changing on the way – neither bird nor beast. And no monkey business either – or that's the end of your being a god. Is that clear?'

'Have you remembered to ask your father?' asked Loki.

This made Thor so angry that he reached for his hammer:

'If you say a word during the entire journey I'll smash your skull. Now do you understand?'

Loki smiled sweetly. He had understood. He was not to say a word. *That* Thor would regret. Without a murmur he climbed into the chariot and sat down beside Thor. Heimdall made a fuss at the gate: no god was permitted to leave Asgard. Thor said he was acting as leader. Heimdall grumbled, but Thor grumbled louder; and they set off posthaste, over the rainbow bridge.

Nowadays it was not often that a god visited the people

in Midgard; it made a great stir when Thor came driving along, and many of them shouted 'hurrah.' But Thor was in a bad mood and, while Loki waved at them all, Thor looked neither right nor left.

Loki pointed out the way and they soon found themselves in barren countryside where there was not much to see – especially when darkness descended; so they had to search out a place to spend the night. They soon found a small farmhouse and stopped to ask for a night's shelter. The farmer and his wife realized at once whom they were talking to, and their legs could scarcely carry them for sheer awe. They were poor people and didn't have much to offer; however, the farmer would kill a sheep. But no – Thor wished to provide for human beings as a god should: he killed his own goats and told his servant Loki to flay and cook them. Thor and Loki sat down to supper with the farmer and his wife and their son Thialfi and their daughter Roskva. Loki said not a word, but he could eat all right. Thor told them to throw all the bones onto the goatskins, and this they did – except for Thialfi, who had bitten a splinter off a shin-bone in order to get at the marrow. Thor chatted with the good people and asked them whether they were afraid of the giants. No they were not, the farmer said, for they believed in the gods.

The next morning Thor swung his hammer over the goatskins containing the bones, and Tooth Grinder and Gat-Tooth arose from the dead with skin, bones, and all. But as Thor was harnessing them he noticed that one of the goats – Gat-Tooth – was limping on one of its hind legs. Who hadn't thrown *all* the bones onto the goatskins, as he had told them? he bawled. Then the farmer and his wife – who a moment ago had been rejoicing at having coped with

the gods so well – fell to their knees and begged for mercy, even though they weren't aware of having sinned. But Thialfi said it was he, for he hadn't thought a mere splinter could be a bone; then Roskva said it was probably she who had accidentally swallowed a bone. Thor realized that the two young people were covering up for one another and thought well of them. Casting a sidelong glance at Loki, he said he had been in need of a couple of reliable servants for a long time, and he would take the youngsters with him as a punishment. Naturally their parents had to say that it was not a punishment, but a great favor, to enter the services of a god.

They were obliged to leave the goats behind, and they set off on foot, eastward in the direction of Utgard. When they had been walking for half a day they reached the ocean that separated Midgard and Utgard, and they had to be ferried across. That took the rest of the day, and darkness had already descended when they reached the land of the frost giants. There was not a giant in sight, but nor were there any dwellings in which they could shelter for the night, and it was not good weather in the land of the giants. It was only now that it occurred to Thor that he didn't have his goats to kill for supper; that was unfortunate, since he wanted to be in good form when they reached their destination. Loki had thought of that when they let the goats remain in the farmyard, but he wasn't allowed to say anything.

Now it had grown so dark that they couldn't see anything at all, for neither the moon nor the stars were in sight. But suddenly they discovered that they were in a shelter; obviously they must have entered a building that was open on one side. To have a roof over their heads was the most important thing, and they quickly fell asleep after the long

journey. But they woke up again almost as quickly, for the whole house was shaking and the ground was rocking beneath them. Earthquake! They groped around in the darkness and found an outbuilding which seemed to be standing more firmly, but the rumbling kept on all night long and they didn't get much sleep.

At daybreak Thor went outside to have a look around. He saw a big hill just outside the house. But when it grew lighter he noticed that the hill was moving up and down – so the ground hadn't settled yet after the earthquake. And when it was light he saw that it wasn't a hill, but a giant who was lying there asleep and snoring – so *that* was what they had heard!

Thor raised his hammer Mjollnir – but at that very moment the giant got up and – on end – he was even bigger still. Thor had to bend his head far back in order to meet his gaze and thought twice about throwing his hammer. He put a brave face on it and asked the giant his name.

'My name is Skrymir,' he said. 'And I don't need to ask what your name is – I can tell from your famous hammer that you must be As-Thor with the superhuman strength. I suppose it was you who carted my glove off.'

Skrymir reached out his hand, which was not exactly puny, and picked up his glove. So this had been the shelter they had slept in during the night, and the outbuilding was the thumb of the glove. Fortunately, Loki, Thialfi, and Roskva had already gone outside, or they would have been in a tight squeeze.

Skrymir asked whether they shouldn't all go along together; they agreed, but found it difficult to keep up – they had to take a dozen steps or more for every step the giant took. Thialfi managed best; he even tried to get ahead of



the giant, but Thor held him back – they had to save their strength. They had had nothing to eat or drink for nearly two days, and were already exhausted. Gasping for breath, they were relieved when Skrymir eventually stopped in a small forest and said they could rest there for the night. Skrymir himself was more tired than hungry after the long day's march; he thought they had rushed along at such a pace he could hardly keep up with them, and he wanted to lie down and sleep. But if they were hungry they could open his knapsack; they didn't appear to have brought lunch packs with them.

Skrymir went back to sleep and started snoring. Thor and his servants – for Loki too was a servant – thought there might indeed be some food in the knapsack, but soon found that it was tied up very tightly. Thialfi and Loki couldn't undo the knot, and Thor himself had to untie it. But even he pulled and tugged at the knot in vain, getting into a worse and worse temper. He was not a little tired of that giant making a fool of him, and he took his hammer and hurled it at the giant's head. Mjollnir returned as usual to Thor's hand, to be sure, but for the first time ever it had failed to fell its prey. Skrymir woke up at the blow. Sitting up, he asked:

'Did a leaf just drop on my head? I thought I felt something. Have you had anything to eat?'

He noticed the knapsack had not been opened, and said:

'Well, one can see you are tough men – and a tough woman, as becomes an As and his company. But you must get a bit of sleep nevertheless, for we have far to go tomorrow if you want to reach the home of the giants.'

Skrymir lay down and fell asleep at once, and soon the thundering started. Thor had scarcely lain down before he

sprang up again; Loki tried to calm him, but that made Thor even angrier – he grabbed his hammer with both hands, swung it so far behind him that it touched the ground, and slung it straight at the giant's head. The giant woke up instantly and said:

'Now what's the matter? Did an acorn just fall on my head? Goodness, are you still up, Thor? How can you gods manage without sleep? I've heard many things about you Aesir, but you are tougher than I thought.'

Thor mumbled in his beard and lay down beside his companions. But as the giant soon began to snore again, Thor couldn't sleep for noise and vexation. He thought he might not have hit the mark the first couple of times – it hadn't been light enough – and he lay waiting until dawn so that he could take better aim. At daybreak, he mustered all his strength and aimed carefully at the sensitive spot on the giant's temple – and Mjollnir sank so deep into his head that it could scarcely get out again and return to Thor's hand. But back it came, while the giant sat up, and touched his head, saying:

'Didn't a bird just drop something? This is not a very peaceful place to sleep. Anyway, we'd better be on our way. Hey there, Thor! Are you awake?'

Thor was indeed awake. Loki was also awake and had been shaking his head at Thor, though he hadn't said anything. On the other hand, it was difficult to rouse Thialfi and Roskva, who were so tired that they had slept through it all.

So once more they walked for most of the day. That is to say, the giant walked and the others ran, and the sweat poured down them even though the weather wasn't hot. Finally Skrymir stopped, and said:

'Now it isn't much farther to Utgard; I myself have a job to do elsewhere. I've seen what you're capable of, otherwise I would have advised you to turn back, or at any rate not to be too ambitious. For in Utgard there are bigger giants than me, and I'm somewhat bigger than you – not that it's always a question of size. You seem to be able to manage for days without food and drink. I can't do that.'

Whereupon he opened his knapsack and sat down to eat. And, pointing straight ahead, he said:

'Just follow your noses. Thanks for your company. It was most enjoyable.'

Thor didn't answer.

They walked on, though at a somewhat slower pace. Toward evening they came to such a big castle that they couldn't even see it all in one glance. They found their way to an iron gate, but there was no gatekeeper – the giants seemed not to worry about trespassers. Thor struggled for a long time to open the gate. But Loki had already squeezed in between the bars, Thialfi and Roskva after him, so Thor had to make the effort to squeeze inside too. It was slow going, but he had lost weight on the journey, otherwise he would have remained stuck between the bars.

Thor gave up the idea of immediately attacking the giants, as he had originally planned. It was probably wiser to assume the mask of friendship and make the most of the giants' hospitality, tired out as they were and suffering from hunger and thirst. They walked across a big courtyard (still no one trying to stop them) to a big banqueting hall, which they entered. There they saw two huge rows of enormous giants sitting opposite one another. On a throne in the middle of one row sat the biggest; he seemed, indeed, to be taller than Skrymir. Some of the giants caught sight of the

guests and, nodding their enormous heads in friendly greeting, they bid them approach and meet Loki, their king.

When Thor heard that the King of the Giants was called Loki he started, looking suspiciously at the Loki he had brought with him. Loki was obviously a very common name for a giant.

It was some time before the giant on the throne – and so this was Utgard-Loki – noticed the strangers. But when the other giants pointed them out to him, he said:

'Well, well, we have some distinguished visitors, have we! I suppose that little chap must be As-Thor? According to what we hear, you must be stronger than you look. And that must apply to your companions too, otherwise you wouldn't have brought them with you. We'll have to put you to a test, because people who cannot perform some feat or other are not welcome here.'

Thor was about to say that the gods usually entertained their visitors before contesting with them, but just then he saw a giant servant enter with a gigantic platter of meat. He was going to reach for the dish, when Utgard-Loki said:

'We were just about to have an eating contest. Let's see if one of you dares to take on our champion eater, Logi.'

The champion had taken a stand at one side of the platter; his jaws filled his whole head and his great teeth struck sparks when they touched one another. But Thor and his companions were quite ready to tuck into some food and thought they could easily get the better of anyone at that sport. Utgard-Loki pointed at Loki:

'You there! You look the hungriest. One, two, three – start eating!'

So they gobbled up the meat, each from his side of the dish and each one quicker than the other – but that, of

course was the intention. When they eventually met in the middle of the platter, nose to nose, Loki had eaten all the meat on his half, whereas Logi had wolfed down the bones and the dish too. Loki had lost. But for him the most important thing was to have taken part – he had eaten his fill. Thor hadn't, and he scowled.

'That wasn't bad at all,' Utgard-Loki said to Loki, 'considering it was our champion you were eating against and you didn't choose the contest yourself. But now you may choose whatever contest you like. You, shrimp!' he said to Thialfi, 'what can you do?'

Thialfi, who had come among gods so suddenly, and now also among giants, and who hadn't had anything to eat or drink for several days, didn't think he was especially good at anything. But since he had got ahead of Skrymir on the road a couple of times, and Skrymir had even said he could hardly keep up with him, he thought he might be able to run a race.

'That's a good sport,' said Utgard-Loki, but you don't have particularly long legs and it wouldn't be fair to let you run a race with one of our greatest runners. 'Hugi!' he cried – and at once a strange creature came running up; he looked more like a dwarf than a giant, and was so light-footed that he scarcely touched the ground.

They started running back and forth through the great hall, and all the giants shouted 'Hugi, Hugi!' Thor and Roskva shouted 'Thialfi, Thialfi!' but it didn't have much effect – Loki wasn't allowed to say anything, of course. Hugi came first, but only just; for when he turned round at the end of the track, Thialfi had already got there. Everyone thought that Thialfi had been so close to winning that he ought to have another chance, but in the second race Thial-

fi had scarcely managed to turn about before Hugi reached the goal.

'Anyone can be unlucky,' said Utgard-Loki. 'We saw how well Thialfi ran in the first race, so let him try once more.'

But Thialfi had been tramping for several days, and the two strenuous races had not made him less tired; so in the third race he had only got halfway through the hall when he met Hugi already on his way back.

Thialfi was embarrassed about having failed and having brought shame upon the gods. He had tears in his eyes and, noticing this, his sister couldn't hold back her tears. When Utgard-Loki asked her what she could do best and she couldn't answer for weeping, he said:

'Ah, you would like a weeping contest! That's a good feminine sport, and we even have a professional mourner who can really do her stuff. Flug!'

Up stepped a huge giantess who was all eyes – out of which the tears splashed, streaming across the floor so that everyone had to mind their toes. Roskva's tears didn't make much impression, even though she wept all the more the worse she fared.

'Oh well,' said Utgard-Loki, 'you Aesir are a merry lot and weeping is not what you're best at. But now we've come to the chief contest. We have all heard about the feats of As-Thor, and we are anxious to see them. Against you we scarcely have a chance, but we shall do our best just the same. There is probably nothing you cannot do better than everyone else, but tell us yourself what you wish to excel in.'

Thor was so weak from hunger and thirst that – since Logi and Loki had emptied the platter – he couldn't think of anything better than a drinking contest.

'That's a good manly sport,' said Utgard-Loki. 'We shall send for the horn.'

Instantly, up stepped a giant servant with a drinking horn, which was only used on festive occasions.

'To empty it in one draught is good drinking,' said Utgard-Loki. But it's a poor show if it cannot be emptied in two. You can safely drink – it's just water and cannot go to one's head.'

Thor looked at the horn and didn't consider it big for a giant horn, even though it may have been rather long. Since his thirst was several days old, he thought he could toss that off in no time. But after he had been slaking his thirst for several minutes and he handed over the horn, the water still splashed over the brim.

'Well,' said Utgard-Loki, 'it looks to me as if you only drank in order to quench the worst of your thirst and not in order to empty the horn.'

The giants laughed, while Loki winked in vain at Thor. Thialfi had tears in his eyes, and Roskva was still crying even though it didn't count any more. Thor said nothing, but raised the horn to his lips once more; since the water was rather salty he was still thirsty. He no longer drank for pleasure, and when he handed over the horn, although the water no longer splashed over the brim, it hadn't gone down very much.

'You must be pulling our legs, Thor,' said Utgard-Loki. 'The first two draughts were nothing to speak of, but now you're surely going to show us that you can easily empty the horn in one.'

So Thor had to get going again; this time he drank until he was dizzy and saw red. Now you could really see he had drunk a mighty swill, but it was still far to the bottom.

'You didn't do as well as I would have expected,' said Utgard-Loki, 'and it was you yourself who chose a drinking contest, even though you don't seem to have been thirsty. I would have suggested something else, but I don't suppose you'd feel like any further contests?'

Thor hadn't recovered his breath yet and merely answered with a snort.

'That's what I like to hear,' said Utgard-Loki, 'but we must take it gently. Here our children compete about how high they can lift my cat. I wouldn't suggest this if I hadn't seen that you're not as capable as I expected.'

Then a cat ran up – a giant cat, to be sure, though nothing to speak of for Thor, who didn't care for cats anyway. Without a word, Thor stuck his arm under its belly as if to hurl it right up to the ceiling, but the cat arched its back, and the higher Thor raised its belly, the more it did so. When he took hold with the other arm too, and exerted himself to the utmost, the cat raised one paw from the ground but remained standing on three legs, meowing.

'It's a big cat,' said Utgard-Loki, 'and Thor is no giant to look at.'

Now Thor was so angry about having got the worst of it that he felt he could get the better of even the biggest giant. He stood there glowering, a frown furrowing his forehead deeper and deeper and his eyes flashing. Never before had anyone dared to tackle Thor when he looked like that.

'Come on, he who dares!' he shouted.

'Bravo!' cried Utgard-Loki. 'Now I can recognize the As-Thor of the descriptions. Ellen!' he shouted – and a dreadful-looking old crone came limping up.

'Let me introduce my old nurse,' said Utgard-Loki. 'She's still got plenty of guts, and has laid giants flat before today.'



Of course, there do exist stronger giants, but I should think they'd almost be too strong for you.'

Thor would never have dreamed of raising a hand against an old woman, and even Loki tried to stop him by signaling with his arms and legs. But exasperated as he was, Thor could neither attend to Loki nor show consideration for old women. He set upon Ellen, determined to push her over, but she refused to budge and Thor nearly toppled over backward. The more he pushed, the firmer she stood her ground. Then she began to wrestle with him, and although he pushed and puffed for all he was worth he was nearly forced on to one knee.

'Enough!' said Utgard-Loki. 'We'll stop now while the going's good. We are hospitable folks and take a pride in seeing that our guests come to no harm. It was a fair contest, and now we shall celebrate.'

So at last Thor and his companions sat down to table with the giants, and dishes of meat and drinking horns were brought in. Apart from the fact that Loki wasn't hungry and Thor was no longer thirsty, they ate and drank with the giants, though they didn't speak to them. Thor was huffy and had no wish to talk, Loki wasn't allowed to, and Thialfi and Roskva didn't know what to say.

'You don't say much,' said Utgard-Loki. 'But, of course, it isn't always a question of words.'

It grew late, and the guests were given shelter for the night; in the morning they had breakfast and were even given lunch packs to take with them. Utgard-Loki himself escorted them to the gate and waved goodbye:

'Thank you for coming,' he said. 'It isn't everyday we have such distinguished guests. We won't forget this for a long time.'

Now they were just as far from home as they had been from Utgard when they had set out, and it wasn't exactly a triumphal procession. Thor was still scowling as he walked, and Roskva and Thialfi didn't even dare go near him. But Loki walked just behind him like a good servant. Thor mumbled something about having fought the giants on the giants' own terms after a long journey without food or drink – the outcome would have been quite different if he had been on home ground. Loki didn't comment upon his excuses, and Thor grew more and more irritated. At last he shouted:

'Why don't you say something?'

Loki pointed at his mouth and shook his head.

'That's enough from you!' shouted Thor. 'It was the giants you weren't supposed to talk to.'

'May I speak now?' asked Loki. 'In that case, I'll tell you something you could have done with hearing at the time. Had I been allowed to say anything I would have reminded you that in a contest there must always be two contestants, as when I ate in competition with Logi and Thialfi ran races with Hugi. But whom did you compete with when you drank and when you tried to lift the cat? If you had challenged one of the giants to do better than you had done you would really have seen some fun. You always talk so much about the giants' tricks, so why didn't you make sure there was no trickery involved? I could have told you what lay behind it all, but you always have to be so clever. The Logi I competed with was Flame, and I knew that quite well, but I was not eating in order to win but because I was hungry. The Hugi with whom Thialfi raced was Thought, who can reach the end of the world in a flash. The Flugr with whom Roskva had a weeping contest was the river that flows without end. The horn you drank out of, which was rather long,

had its other end in the ocean, and when we reach the ocean we shall now be able to wade across. The cat you couldn't lift was one end of the serpent you lugged away when it was young, but which has now grown so big that it can wind itself around the whole of Midgard; and the old crone you couldn't budge was Old Age, to whom every giant must succumb, but whom you could have slain had you remembered to take your apples with you, which I'm sure I reminded you about before we set out. And the giant you couldn't slay dazzled your eyes so that you wouldn't discover he had pushed a mountain in the way of your hammer – you thought it was part of his head. When we reach the spot where he lay snoring, you'll now see three rectangular valleys in the mountain bearing the imprints of your hammer. You have been duped, and it wouldn't have happened had you listened to me. Still, you *have* given them a real fright, for they didn't think you were so strong.'

Thor was dumbfounded. He didn't know whether to be angry about having been duped, or exultant about having given the giants a real fright – for that had been his intention. He looked with satisfaction at the valleys he had struck in the mountain with his hammer, and felt quite pleased with himself when they were able to wade across the ocean. He was thankful that Thialfi and Roskva had discovered he was quite a different chap from what he appeared to be at the home of the giants; Thialfi was proud of having been almost as swift as Thought, and Roskva was relieved that only a river had been able to defeat her, so she stopped crying.

Thor cast a sidelong glance at Loki and asked:

'And Utgard-Loki – who was he, then?'

'Why, that was the King of the Giants,' said Loki.





## Thor Goes Fishing

As soon as Thor had recovered from the last adventure, he thought of taking his revenge. He had recovered by eating an overdose of Idun's apples – he hadn't eaten any for several days and had almost begun to look old; but after he had eaten them for some time he looked like a strapping youth, although of course he still had a beard. In that shape he set off, and this time he would certainly not take Loki with him. Looking so youthful, he imagined no one would recognize him, and this he would take advantage of.

The biggest fisherman-giant was called Hymir and naturally he lived beside the ocean. With Hymir's help, Thor would try to hook the serpent the giants had fooled him with, but against which he had almost been able to hold his own. Hymir was renowned for catching big whales, and this angered Njord, for what did Hymir want with all those whales which were much better off in the sea? If Thor was able to catch the Midgard serpent (it was called this because it encircled the whole of Midgard), and at the same time teach Hymir a lesson, then the gods wouldn't be able to say that no good came out of Thor's journeys.

Once more Thor made his way to the ocean, though in a

different direction than before – the ocean surrounded everything. It was high tide again, for in the meantime Thor had relieved himself of all its water. He arrived at Hymir's hut and asked the giant if he would take him on as an apprentice. Hymir said that many lads came asking to be his apprentice, but he couldn't use them all – in fact he couldn't use any of those human weaklings. Thor (who did not of course call himself Thor) didn't look very impressive either.

'You'd catch cold if I sailed as far out and stayed out for such a long time as I usually do.'

Thor controlled his rage and said that he was good at rowing; he promised to row the giant's boat as far out as necessary and farther still. The giant agreed that he should be allowed to show what he was worth, but at his own risk.

Before they set out the next morning Thor asked Hymir what they were going to use as bait. Hymir, who hadn't got up so early as Thor and was always grumpy in the morning, said that was up to him.

Looking around, Thor caught sight of Hymir's cattle grazing beside the beach. He picked up the biggest ox, wrung its neck, and took it back to the boat, which it weighed down considerably. Hymir grabbed the front oars and Thor the back ones, and Thor got up such a speed that the giant had to move his arms up and down so fast that it almost looked as if he were flying. They hadn't rowed very far out before Hymir said that they had reached the banks where he usually caught flounder – he didn't feel like deep-sea fishing that day.

'But I do,' said Thor. 'I've come in order to learn something, and I promised to row out as far as necessary.'

So he rowed on, though now he was allowed to row

alone – the giant sat in front with folded arms. At noon he said they were so far out that they were no longer safe from the sea serpent.

'Then we had better row on until we are out of danger,' said Thor. And then they did reach the place where the Midgard serpent was – Thor could tell that because the giant kept shifting in his seat.

So Thor shipped the oars and asked Hymir to show him how to catch a whale, and Hymir had to produce a fair-sized fishing-line. Thor tested it and, finding it strong enough, he baited the hook with the ox and cast out the line. The serpent, which perceived the loud splash, was not used to being served oxen so far out in the ocean and swallowed the hook immediately. This made the boat rock so violently that both Thor and the giant nearly fell overboard. But Thor thrust his feet against the side of the boat and pulled with all his might – which we know was considerable – and up above the surface rose the head of the serpent. What a sight! Its head was somewhat larger than the small one it once had in Asgard and, hissing and belching forth sparks, it shot out all its tongues of fire, so that if the wind hadn't been against it probably nobody would have survived. But Thor hissed just as loudly as the serpent and his eyes flashed. The giant, on the other hand, was struck dumb with terror; he was either afraid of the serpent, or that Thor would get hold of it, or that the boat would capsize and he himself would drown if Thor managed to haul the serpent in.

And when Thor did in fact begin to haul the endless serpent into the boat, the giant took out his whaling knife and cut the line, so that the serpent sank and Thor nearly fell overboard backward. With an angry roar he flung his hammer at the serpent; and the sea became yellow and red, so he

thought he must have killed it. But he had somewhat of an empty feeling as he stood there with his hand raised, waiting for Mjollnir to return as usual – and it never came. Either it had remained stuck in the serpent, which was soft all over, or else the hammer couldn't find its way back through the sea – never having tried it before.

Then Hymir understood who he was dealing with, and he also realized that what all the giants had dreamed about – that Thor had lost his hammer – had now really happened. Now that he had recovered from his fright, he couldn't help jeering:

'Once too often into deep water – and Thor loses his hammer!'

But he should never have said that. Thor could strike without his hammer, and knock him overboard – even with his left hand, which was nearest.

Then he rowed ashore and walked slowly back to Asgard. How was he going to face the gods – without Mjollnir!





## Mjollnir or Freyja

Odin had been up in Hlidskjalf, keeping his eye open, and so he had seen it all. And since he was cleverer than a man he had also understood it all. The Midgard serpent, which had got the hammer in its mouth and swallowed it, had vomited it up on the giants' beach, whereupon the giants had come and retrieved it. Thus, he saw with his own eye how the serpent was in league with the giants; and the serpent had already encircled Midgard. Things didn't look very promising.

Odin summoned the Council of the Gods, and it had already assembled when Thor arrived home. He was immediately summoned before the council. He was not at all happy and didn't know what to do with his hands – his right hand was twitching so peculiarly at his side where Mjollnir used to be.

Odin spoke:

'I am a god of few words. Words that are repeated lose their force. If gods are of more than one mind, they have no mind. Freyr has of his own accord made peace, Thor has on his own initiative waged war. The giants have thereby got possession of our best weapons. Without Mjollnir we are

defenseless in the face of a giant attack. Twice Thor has left Asgard without permission. You can see the consequences.'

Thor was burning red in the face – even redder than his beard. But it was not only from shame, it was also from rage. He couldn't hold his tongue any longer:

'I have given the giants the shock of their lives. They may have tricked me, but they realized they were no match for me.'

Odin looked at him and reduced him to silence. Odin looked at them all and reduced them all to silence. The silence was so painful that Freyja suddenly shouted:

'What a good thing we got rid of that murderous hammer!'

But nobody heard, for at that very moment there was such a loud blare that all the gods jumped up and covered their ears with their hands: it was Heimdall who had blown his horn, and he only did so when there was great danger afoot. Had the giants already launched an attack? Odin couldn't reach Hlidskjalf quickly, but his servant Hermod came rushing up with a message from Heimdall: a giant bird had flown in and landed outside the gate, but Heimdall couldn't possibly tell it would land outside, and that's why he had blown his horn, and the warriors from Valhalla had already begun to take up position on the Plain of Ida in order to give the giants battle. Odin would not permit a giant to enter the Holy Grove, so he told Hermod to go out and listen to what the giants' messenger had to say. In the meantime Heimdall had come down to take part in the council. Shouting extremely loudly (he couldn't hear himself, having just blasted his horn), he said that the danger was not so great after all, since no other giants were in sight.

Then Hermod returned and said:

'The giants demand compensation because Hymir, the giant fisherman, has been slain. They have managed to get hold of Thor's hammer Mjollnir, and they are willing to accept it as compensation and forget the whole affair.'

The gods shouted in great indignation – each one louder than the other and Thor the loudest. And since they all directed their angry shouts at Hermod, upon whom it had fallen to speak for the giants, he scarcely dared say anything more.

'Be quiet!' Odin shouted at the gods – and at Hermod:

'Speak!'

Hermod continued:

'If the gods cannot accept this proposal, the giants are willing to return the hammer. But they will no longer tolerate the gods molesting them. Those were their words,' yelled Hermod, when a couple of gods started shouting again.

'The bird says that the giants want peace with the gods, and they had looked upon the marriage between the giantess Gerd and the god Freyr as a sign of peace. But now the gods have broken the peace and resumed their giant killing. They will return Mjollnir only if they can be sure it will not be used against them. And as a token of good faith they have proposed yet another marriage – between the chief giant Thrym and the goddess Freyja.'

The gods were speechless. But Freyja remembered their once having promised to barter her for a wall.

'And just as the giantess Gerd has taken up residence with the gods, so is the goddess Freyja to take up residence with the giants in order to even things up. The hammer will be handed over to Freyja at the wedding. The bird is to return with the answer,' Hermod concluded.

'There, you see,' said Odin.

'You should do what Odin tells you,' said Frigg.

'Giant spawn!' sneered Thor. 'They have stolen Mjollnir, it's not for them to make conditions. They should all be mowed down.'

'With what?' asked Loki.

'I must have that hammer!' shouted Thor, glancing sideways at Freyja. Loki glanced at her too.

'Aren't you against war, Freyja? Don't you go in for love, Freyja? Between gods and giants? Think what giant-god children could come out of that – the world would become new again. None of the gods is worthy of you, Freyja, but perhaps one of the giants might be. Look at your brother Freyr – and your father Njord!'

'Well spoken!' shouted Thor.

'A goddess of love ought to be married,' said Frigg.

'Everyone has to make sacrifices,' said Tyr.

'Yes!' Freyja shouted. 'I'll sacrifice myself, I'll set off at once. *Then* perhaps I may be allowed to leave Asgard?'

It was no sweet look that sweet Freyja gave Odin. Her freckles sparkled and the golden tears trickled down. Her father and her brother tried to calm her down and said that Freyja didn't really mean it, but other gods and goddesses seemed rather to like the idea of Freyja sacrificing herself. Freyja sniffed, thinking: 'As soon as I'm in Utgard and I've got that murderous hammer in my lap, I won't give it up!'

'And who is going to bring Mjollnir back?' asked Odin, his eye piercing Freyja like a spear.

Balder, who felt embarrassed on behalf of his family, said:

'If Freyja is first in Utgard, we won't have any use for Mjollnir. We cannot do without Freyja.'

He couldn't help remembering that, in his dreams, Thor *did* have his hammer.

'We could get the hammer back without sacrificing Freyja,' he said.

'But how? How?' shouted Thor.

'By negotiation,' said Balder.

'Bosh!' said Loki. 'By lying and cheating. If they have cheated and deceived Thor, it is only right and proper for him to cheat and deceive them. Let Thor show us how cunning he is!'

Thor frowned and scratched his head and got an idea!

'You, Loki! You are always playing the fool and changing your shape into any guise. You can take the shape of a kind of Freyja – and you can even *fly* home with Mjollnir!'

Many of the gods thought this proposal was a good idea, and they were already going to adopt it when Loki drowned their talk with his scornful laughter: 'Can you imagine what might happen if I were goddess of love for the giants and had got hold of Mjollnir? Do you really trust me?'

There was a deep hush in the assembly of the gods. Balder was still embarrassed on behalf of the gods and felt that Loki was better than he was reputed to be: he always got the blame and never any thanks. He would have liked to answer Loki's question in the affirmative, but he felt that the gods, without wishing to say so openly, didn't trust Loki.

'No!' said Balder.

'Thanks!' said Loki, and bowed.

By now Heimdall had regained his hearing and understood what was going on. He looked at Thor and said that it wasn't such a crazy idea to send someone capable of wielding the hammer disguised as Freyja. But Thor was the only one able to do that.

Once again Thor became burning red in the face: was *he* to dress up in women's clothes? Whatever would human beings think if they got to know? Cock-and-bull stories would be going the rounds for ever after. Besides, even the giants couldn't mistake him for a young girl.

'Indeed!' said Loki. 'After your apple cure you've become so young and rosy-cheeked that you look like a young girl. All you'd have to do is to put on a wedding dress and Freyja's jewels – those she can spare for the time being – and pile your hair up on top. Incidentally, you'll have to wear a bridal veil, so that they can't see you too clearly.'

'It's no laughing matter,' said Thor.

'No?' said Loki. 'If you don't get Mjollnir back, Asgard will soon be full of giants – isn't that what you mean?'

Thor felt instinctively for Mjollnir, which still wasn't there.

'But you could also let the giants keep the hammer,' said Loki. 'They can't be bothered to use it anyway. They haven't used Freyr's sword either.'

Then Freyr said something about the necessity of treating the giants kindly, and Freyja said that the giants were more peaceful than the gods, and Balder said they ought to make peace with them. But Odin said:

'Only evil comes from making war on friends and peace with foes.'

And he determined that Thor should journey to Utgard himself, as Heimdall and Loki had suggested. He sent Hermod out to the giants' messenger to tell them that their proposal had been accepted: Freyja would come in eight days' time and receive the hammer – and Thrym. He told Thor to make ready: he was to shave and lose some weight – he had better live solely on apples until the wedding journey.

Freyja was almost sorry it wasn't she who was going out traveling. And she resolved to defy all prohibitions – her cats saw just as well in the dark as in daylight, and she would leave Asgard secretly in the darkness of night. Thor, on the contrary, was not pleased to be going out traveling.

'My goat is lame,' he said.

'Freyja will lend you her chariot,' said Odin. 'You had better take it over immediately and get used to the cats.'

Thus it was. Freyja remained in Asgard and shed many a tear. The following week Thor and Loki drove away in Freyja's chariot. Thor was wearing a wedding gown and veil, with jewels on his chest and big rings on his fingers – they were not Freyja's, but some the dwarfs had made for the occasion. Loki was disguised as a bridesmaid. Thor, who couldn't turn his voice into a gentle soprano, had been ordered by Odin to keep silent during the entire journey and let Loki do the talking. Loki gave Thor some good advice on the way and told him not to use his hammer – that would bring dire repercussions. Thor was fuming inwardly about his female attire – the giant spawn would certainly have to pay for this!

The senior giants and their giant wives were all assembled in the banqueting hall. From under his veil, Thor looked around for his old friend Utgard-Loki, but couldn't find him anywhere. Now it was Thrym, the bridegroom, who sat on the throne, and Freyja – that is, Thor – was seated opposite him.

'I must say,' said Thrym, 'that's a thumping great bride. I had been afraid that Freyja would be too delicate to stand even a hug. I'm no longer afraid of that,' he said, winking at Thor, who was grimacing under his veil.

Then the giants and their guests were served fish and roast meat and sweetmeats and ale. Thor, who had been

living on apples for eight days, ate eight salmon, an ox, and all the sweetmeats served to the ladies, and he emptied three barrels of ale.

Thrym attempted to make conversation, but Thor had enough to do in stuffing his mouth full. Thrym said:

'Well I never! I've never seen a bride put away such large portions.'

The bridesmaid – that is, Loki – said:

'Freyja doesn't usually eat so much. But she has eaten nothing at all for eight days for sheer longing to be married.'

Thrym was pleased with that answer. He leaned toward Freyja, and he was just going to draw her veil aside and give her a kiss when he started back in surprise, bumping his head on the back of his throne:

'What a look Freyja has!' he said. 'Her eyes are almost flaming.'

The bridesmaid said:

'Freyja usually has a gentle gaze. But she hasn't slept for eight nights for sheer longing to be married.'

Thrym was also pleased with this answer. His sister, who sat beside Thor and had been drinking rather a lot, was slightly tipsy and said to Thor:

'Dear sister-in-law! What big rings you have – you may give me those as a wedding present.'

Thrym had been growing more and more impatient, and now he shouted:

'The wedding shall proceed! Bring the hammer and place it on the bride's lap. Give me your hand,' he said to Freyja.

But it was Thor, of course, and Thrym had never received such a handshake. He sank to his knees and in the next moment the hammer struck his skull. Mjollnir hadn't suffered any harm during captivity, and immediately returned



to Thor's hand; and even though Loki tried to hold him back, Thor could no longer restrain himself. Now the giant's sister was done for too, and all the other giants who didn't manage to escape. Thor and Loki were left alone, surrounded by nothing but giant corpses.

'You're mad!' said Loki. 'Let's get away from here at once.'

And so they set off for Asgard, in Freyja's chariot.



## Loki Tempts Balder

Things didn't look very good in Midgard. The Midgard serpent was tightening its hold, eating the fishes in the sea and poisoning it with its venom. Men, and especially the fishermen, still complained to Njord – but what could he do about it? The farmers also complained to Freyr because the fields and gardens bore no fruit. The weather was not what it used to be, for it was winter almost all the year round. It may have been lack of necessities that made people more quarrelsome. Fights broke out over the whole of Midgard: brother killed brother for sheer greed, and fathers and sons didn't spare one another either. It may also have been because Freyja no longer came to Midgard, and because Odin and the gods of war set men up against one another in order to make them more accustomed to fighting should the giants advance. The giants had demanded compensation both for Thiazi and Thrym – how much more might they demand for all the chief giants Thor had slain in Utgard? He had killed all their leaders, to be sure, and that may have set them back for a while.

During these bad times Balder was busy. Many people were tired of the gods of war. They prayed in vain to Freyja –

they did not know that she had been forbidden to visit Midgard – and more and more of them prayed to Balder, for they had heard he was the gentlest of the gods, even though in Midgard they had never seen him. Whereas they had hitherto prayed for entirely different and conflicting things, now men prayed to Balder for the same things – for peace and justice. And while Freyja had taken loving care of individuals, Balder couldn't help anyone in particular without helping everyone at the same time and making Midgard a more peaceful and just world.

Balder's dreams left him no peace. Soon the serpent and the wolf would be as big as in his dreams. Fenrir had long ago spat out the sword Thor had stuck in his jaws to prevent him from biting. With his enormous jaws he snapped up everything that flew in the air, and at night his howl was heard all over Asgard.

It was unthinkable that everything should end as he had dreamed – with Ragnarok.

But it soon seemed impossible that it should end otherwise.

Things didn't look very good in Asgard. The Aesir and the Vanir were not really on speaking terms. The giantess Gerd was embittered at the thought of Thor's bloodshed in Utgard, and Freyr took her and the giants' part. For the Aesir, Mjollnir had been more important than Freyja – Freyja couldn't forget this and neither could Balder.

He often thought about telling everything he knew in the Council of the Gods – of revealing his dream about Ragnarok.

But even if he were to speak, the wrath of the gods would probably be turned upon him and everything would happen as in his dream – they would set upon him.

And if he didn't speak, everything would probably happen as in the other dream – the giants would set upon the gods.

If he tried to prevent one of the dreams from coming true, then the other dream would come true.

Sleepless, he wandered around the halls in Breidablik, listening to the prayers of men and the howling of the wolf.

Suddenly he felt something prick his hand, and saw a very large flea hop down onto the floor. There in front of him stood Loki!

'Sorry about the tiny prick. I've been sitting on you for some while, so that they shouldn't see me enter.'

Balder felt ill at ease. But he had to admit that he had been wanting to speak to Loki for a long time. Loki seemed to know something – at any rate about the giants – that the others either didn't know or didn't want to know.

'I think you know something the others don't know – or don't want to know,' said Loki. Balder felt stung, but also insulted on behalf of his family:

'Odin knows everything,' he said.

'Do you think so?' said Loki. 'Hasn't it surprised you how little he has foreseen – how little he has averted? He says that all the gods should be of one mind – his own; although he himself is not of one mind – but of two. He doesn't want a war with the giants because he knows he would lose it, and so he has turned Thor against him. He doesn't want peace with the giants, because he knows that without war he would lose his power over gods and men. He is in two minds but has only one desire: to retain his power even if the whole world should perish. Is that anything new to you?'

'Yes,' said Balder, trying to look angry – it was his own father Loki was speaking about in that way.

'It's not really new, is it?'

'No,' said Balder, looking miserable.

'Good,' said Loki. 'Then we can talk seriously – here where no ravens are listening. Did you know that the giants are planning to attack Asgard?'

'No,' said Balder, 'I didn't. Thor is right, then?'

'Thor thinks he can frighten them away with a hammer. That's all he is – a hand for a hammer. Tyr is the same – though he lacks both hand and hammer.'

Balder endeavored to look angry again – it was his own brothers Loki was speaking about in that way.

'Is that new to you?' asked Loki.

'If it's not new to me, then why are you telling me?'

'You don't speak your thoughts aloud. I do.'

'What is it you want?'

'The same as you – to come to an understanding with the giants. Am I not both a sort of giant and a sort of god? If there weren't both gods *and* giants I'd be finished. They hate me, all of them. You hate me, all of you.'

'I shall propose in council that we start negotiations.'

'Haven't you been suggesting that all the time? The Aesir won't negotiate. The giants won't negotiate with Odin, whom they don't trust. Nor with Thor, who murders them. They would negotiate with you.'

'With me? I can't negotiate on behalf of the gods.'

'No. So you must take over from Odin.'

At this, Balder finally grew angry.

'I'm no traitor!' he shouted.

'But I am!' said Loki. 'Ages ago, when I accompanied Odin to Asgard, it was as spokesman for the giants. It was part of the old covenant between the Aesir and the giants, which the giants have kept but the Aesir have broken. The giants feel that I have betrayed them, and they have lost patience –

with me, and with all of you. But if it hadn't been for me they'd have lost it long ago. Do you trust me?'

'I don't know,' said Balder – which was perfectly true.

'But I trust you. That's not saying much, because they all do – even if they won't take your advice. But I don't trust any of the other Aesir, and you don't either.'

Balder made as if to protest, but Loki shook his head:

'It doesn't help being angry about your own thoughts. Why are you afraid of going to sleep? What is it you dream about?'

Balder didn't want to tell Loki about his dreams – but told him nevertheless. He also told him that Loki and Hod were the only ones who didn't throw things at him. Loki nodded:

'It is possible to prevent the dreams from coming true. But only you can do that.'

'What can I do?'

'You can fly with me to the giants and . . .'

'That's treason!' shouted Balder.

'If you do nothing, you will be betraying those humans who believe in you. The downfall of the gods is also the downfall of humanity.'

Balder felt faint – he hadn't slept for several nights.

'Sleep on it!' said Loki, hopping off.

But Balder didn't sleep well.



## The Death of Balder

Frigg was worried.

She often thought of the days when the gods still felt the march of time – when she still grew older though felt much younger than now – and when the boys were still small and needed her. When she had had to tell Thor off for being too violent, and he told her he wasn't going to be ordered about by a woman. When she had had to comfort Tyr because Thor had hit him; now she wasn't even allowed to comfort Tyr although he had lost an arm – it was like patting a snarling wolf. When she had had to listen to Bragi's endless strings of meaningless words he had made up himself. When she had tried to answer Balder's questions, though even then he used to ask more questions than she could answer. When she used to walk around holding Hod by the hand, telling him about everything he couldn't see, and teaching him to recognize all flowers by their scent and all birds by their song.

Of course it was wonderful that they had all become gods, and stopped aging. But now she wished that the great change had taken place some years earlier, and that time had stopped marching when she and Odin had been a bit younger and the boys had been smaller and still needed her.





But of course they had to be a certain age before they could become gods.

Odin had determined that they, as gods, should live separately – Odin in Valhalla, she in Fensalir, and each of the boys in his own palace. It was wonderful to have plenty of room, of course, but now she wished that they lived a little closer together. Nowadays they only met in council or when they had feasts, and they seldom had those anymore. Sometimes she felt almost superfluous. In the beginning – as divine wife and mother – she had been goddess both of love and of plants and all other beings. But after the settlement with the Vanir, Odin had made Freyja goddess of love and Freyr god of cultivation, and she had merely retained the world of wild nature that should preferably remain untouched. In Asgard there wasn't really any wildlife left that was hers – the wildest was in the land of the frost giants, and they didn't even recognize her.

She still thought she knew her own sons better than they knew themselves. In her opinion they were not happy. Perhaps Bragi, who only had eyes for Idun, was happy; but not Hod and not Tyr and not even Thor, whom everyone admired for his strength. And not Balder, whom everyone (though mostly she, his mother) loved for his gentleness. Balder, who was so fair that he dazzled the eyes, had begun to look so doleful that it touched her to the quick. In the end she couldn't stand it any longer and begged Balder to tell her his troubles – he had always done that as a little boy.

Balder felt that he couldn't hide from his mother what he had revealed to Loki. He also felt that she was the last person he ought to frighten. He couldn't very well tell her he had dreamed that his own brothers – her sons – were out to kill him, while she stood looking on and smiling.

So he asked her whether she had ever been afraid of

death. Frigg replied that gods were not known to die. Odin's brothers – his uncles Vili and Ve – had died, of course, but that had been before the Aesir had become proper gods.

Balder said that he often dreamed of being killed. Frigg tried to reassure him, and herself, and told him it was only a dream. Even as a little boy he used to dream he would never become very old.

When Frigg reminded him that he had once been little, he felt very small and cried as if he would never stop. Frigg comforted him and said he was the most beloved of all the gods – not even the giants would ever think of harming him.

'But it isn't the giants,' Balder wept.

'Is it wild animals, then?' asked Frigg.

'No – well, almost wild animals.'

Frigg couldn't help weeping together with Balder, but in the midst of her tears she felt extremely pleased that it was once more within her power to help. She had hitherto refrained from exercising power over nature and had just left it alone to grow, but now she felt she could approach it. She summoned all the elves and spirits that lived in the wilds of nature and told them she was worried about Balder. She asked them to see to it that all natural beings of whatever species or substance – stone or iron, earth or water, fire or air, trees or plants, birds or fish, animals or snakes – swore an oath that they wouldn't harm Balder. The elves and spirits were just as pleased as she was to be able to help Balder.

But when the whole world had been sworn in in this manner, it became known everywhere that Balder was afraid. This made Balder ashamed, and the other gods were bewildered. Odin was displeased to hear that Frigg had moved heaven and earth just because Balder had had a foolish dream:

'Witless man,' he said, 'to keep vigil all night, worrying about everything.'

Thor said it was no use having the whole world swear an oath if the giants, who were the only ones crazy enough to think of harming a god, hadn't done so too. Loki said the giants would never think of harming Balder unless they felt they were actually under suspicion. He was sure that if the gods swore the same oath as the elves and spirits, the giants would do the same.

'Let's see if they will,' said Thor, swearing the oath. Then the other gods swore it too – all except Odin, who found it superfluous. And so Loki went to the giants and made them swear the oath as well.

Now Balder could rejoice that the whole world loved him – but happy he was not, and he didn't think it fair that he was the only god who could not be harmed. It vexed Thor and Tyr that Balder still looked worried, even though he was the only one who had nothing to fear – perhaps he didn't really believe he was invulnerable? Thor poked him with a spear in order to reassure him – and the spear glanced off without harming him. Balder looked terrified, so Thor poked him still harder – and the same thing happened as before.

'Come and see some fun!' shouted Thor, and the other gods came to see what was going on and began to join in the fun themselves. They all threw something at Balder – stones, clubs, axes – and all things glanced off him or turned aside in the air. Frigg looked on, smiling – pleased to think she could still do something for her son. Even Odin relented and threw (though not very forcefully) Gungnir, his spear-that-nothing-could-stop, at Balder – and Balder stopped it. Loki was the only one who didn't join in; he looked after

Hod, telling him what was going on. Smiling happily, Hod stood thinking that Balder's dream was coming true, though in quite a different way than he had imagined: it was not hate and anger that made the gods set upon Balder, but joy and love. He was sorry he couldn't join in the game himself, but he would be sure to miss the mark.

The only one who was not enjoying himself was Balder, and Thor grew more and more angry with Balder because he still seemed to be afraid. At last, in order to convince him that his fear was groundless, he seized Mjollnir and flung the hammer-that-always-hit-the-mark at Balder. But this time it didn't hit him but returned to Thor's hand, its mission unfulfilled, and everyone rejoiced except Balder.

When Balder was finally left alone that evening, he felt as if he had a flea on him again. Instinctively, he made as if to hit it, but checked himself. The flea hopped down on to the floor and took the shape of Loki.

'That was the first dream,' he said. 'The Aesir mean well, they just have a strange – I mean, divine – way of showing their friendliness. You yourself are safe. Now it's a question of saving the world. The whole world is yours – you simply have to stretch out your hand and take it.'

Loki stretched out his hand, as if he were holding the world in it. Balder didn't take it.

'But if you don't take it, you know how it will all end – you yourself have dreamed about it. Now, listen to me! Everything could be settled quite peacefully. You don't need to accompany me to the giants. They already swear by you – why, I've just been there. I propose that we repeat the war games for the human beings in Midgard – we have been neglecting them for some time. When they see that the gods of war cannot harm you, they will also realize that you

are the greatest of the gods. The others may use weapons against you, but you cannot be hit by them. Just one word from you, and men will swear allegiance to you as the supreme god. You must give them something other to believe in than battle and victory and death – other than resurrection in order only to fight and feast.'

'When did you become so fond of human beings?'

'Haven't you always been so? What are gods, if they are not gods for men?'

'I think you hate the gods,' said Balder. 'I don't think you love human beings. Perhaps you love the giants.'

'No,' said Loki. 'I love you.'

Balder stared at Loki:

'That's what they all say,' he muttered.

'It's also the truth,' said Loki. They said no more on that occasion.

Loki proposed in council that the gods should hold a folk festival in Midgard and perform the drama they had been rehearsing in Asgard. In Midgard people missed the gods, especially since Freyja no longer drove down there; human beings were divided among themselves and needed the gods to bring them together. The gods could display their skill in the use of weapons, at the same time making it clear that a god could not be slain with weapons.

Odin was not in favor of this proposal. But for once Frigg didn't agree with him: the whole world had played its part in making Balder invulnerable, so now they owed the whole world a proof that the oath worked. Freyja and Freyr, who were attending the council again, supported Frigg, and Freyja gave Balder such a sweet look that he almost wondered whether Loki hadn't been speaking to her too. Tyr

supported Odin: they oughtn't to let humans see that the weapons of the gods didn't always work. But Thor had nothing against showing everyone that Mjollnir could tell the difference between friend and foe; the most important thing was to remind humans that their gods were among them and protecting them against all giant spawn. To this, Odin nodded his approval:

'It was always the task of the gods to protect the small and the weak against the big and the strong.'

So then the proposal was adopted.

Balder hadn't said anything. He dared not tell anyone what he was thinking – he scarcely dared admit it to himself. He knew Loki was right, but didn't know whether he could trust him. Although he was no longer disturbed by his dreams, his sleep was nevertheless troubled – it was as if he had fleas all over him.

Balder was summoned to Odin. Odin sat enthroned with his spear in his hand and the ravens on his shoulders, and he bade Balder sit opposite him. He studied him at great length. Balder felt as though Odin was seeing right through him, so he might just as well tell him everything.

Odin said:

'Happiest is he who knows not his own fate. You are not happy; nor am I.'

Balder said:

'I dream a dream about Ragnarok.'

Odin answered:

'So do I. And you feel I am doing too little to avert Ragnarok. And Loki thinks you could do better.'

Balder jumped up. Odin signaled for him to be seated. He sat down. Odin said:

'Thor has caused much distress. We cannot exterminate

the giants. If we are to live in peace with them we cannot retain our power. I cannot make peace on such terms. Could you?’

‘Yes,’ said Balder. ‘We have no choice.’

Odin nodded:

‘When the people attending the festival in Midgard have seen that our weapons are incapable of hurting you, I shall speak to both gods and men and say: “This is my son. Him shall you follow.”’

‘Father!’ cried Balder.

‘My son!’ said Odin. ‘It is best for you to remain silent until the time comes.’

In the evening Balder had a flea on him again. He couldn’t help hitting out at it. Loki gave him a dirty look:

‘You have been speaking to Odin.’

‘You are wrong about him,’ said Balder.

‘If only I’m not wrong about you,’ said Loki.

Those were the last words they said to one another.

Almost all the people were gathered in the biggest square in Midgard, and they cheered when they saw the gods riding down to them over the rainbow bridge. In front rode Odin on Sleipnir, then came Frigg in her horse chariot, Freyja in her cat chariot, Thor and Sif in the goat chariot, Freyr on Golden Bristle, Heimdall on his horse Gold Blaze, and the other senior gods on the gods’ horses, Lightfoot, Silver Blaze, Joy, Gyllir, Glir, and Gisli. But Balder, who had never shown himself among men before, outshone all the others. It was he who was the object of their attention, just as he became the target for the gods’ weapons when the game began.

At first it looked like a game, but when the gods began to

use heavier weapons it looked more serious – as if it were an execution – and the many onlookers couldn't help shrieking with terror, although they knew that for the gods it was still a game. But when Odin's spear-that-nothing-could-stop was stopped by Balder, they began to cheer. And the cheering knew no end, so that Thor had to step forward again and again and hurl his hammer at Balder; it was clear that he was not making a show but throwing with all his might, and yet the hammer was no match for Balder. Finally, all the gods threw at once, and all the weapons whirled in the air, turned aside from Balder and collided with one another and fell to the ground, while the onlookers cheered and clapped.

But at the very moment all the weapons had fallen to the ground and everyone thought the game was over, Balder was pierced in the heart by an arrow and fell down. Many still cheered because they thought it was part of the game, but when they saw the gods standing completely rigid, none of them able to move their hands and lift Balder, who remained lying on the ground, they stopped cheering and a deathly hush fell upon Midgard.

No one had really seen what had happened, and he who had seen the least was blind Hod, who shot the arrow. Someone had put a bow in his hand and helped him to take aim, and Hod – who had been wanting to join in the game – had bent the bow and let fly the arrow. Standing there, he was now the only one who didn't realize that Balder was dead, but he heard the deathly silence and feared the worst. One by one, the gods shook themselves out of their rigidity, and some fell on their knees around Balder and examined the wound and the murder weapon – it was a tiny, slender arrow that couldn't even be compared with Thor's hammer



or Odin's spear. Others – seeing Hod standing there with the bow in his hand – fell upon him, and he didn't know how to defend himself. The silence was broken by Frigg's loud cries of lamentation. She was crying because of her son's death, but also because the oath, which had been sworn by all nature's elves and spirits and all nature's species and substances, had been broken.

As so often happened when the gods were at a loss, they looked around for Loki – but he was not to be seen. Some thought that Odin ought to speak to the people, but he couldn't find words. It was difficult for the gods to think of anything else but Balder's death, though some of them were also thinking that almost all of humankind had witnessed this shame. Men and women had seen the god in whom they most of all believed killed by the gods – for that was how it appeared. They had witnessed, not that a god was invulnerable, but that a god could die. It had never happened before. But if it had happened once, it could happen again. How could the gods be gods for humans after this?

The gods could do nothing else but return the way they had come, taking Balder's body with them in Frigg's chariot. It was not the same proud gods men had seen riding down the rainbow bridge who were now riding up again, slowly and weighed down by sorrow.

Since Balder had not fallen in battle (he hadn't offered any resistance), he could not come under the same arrangement as Odin had made with the Norns – that fallen warriors should go to Valhalla (or Folkvang) in order to continue battle there. Like ordinary mortals, Balder had to go to Hel, the underground realm of the dead, which was no place for a god. At first the gods couldn't speak about it through their

tears, and when Frigg finally found words, it was not for her sorrow but for her anger: Balder's death was not only against the will of the gods but also against the will of human beings and giants and nature herself. In some way or other (she had her suspicions) one solitary little twig had set itself up against the whole world and the will of nature; surely Hel, the goddess of the underworld, must understand that. If Hel wouldn't give Balder back without demanding something in recompense, she, Frigg, was prepared to go to Hel, for she could be spared while Balder could not. She asked who would be willing to ride to Hel with that message, and Hermod immediately offered to do so, even though it was a terrible journey. Odin gave him his own horse for the journey, and Hermod set off.

Thus the gods were still hoping for a reunion when they laid out Balder's body on Ringhorn, the boat they were going to use for his funeral pyre. But they had difficulty in bearing their sorrow; they felt so weak that they couldn't push the boat into the water – even Thor's arms dropped from sheer fatigue. But several giants had also come to attend the funeral (it was the only time the gods had ever allowed the giants to enter Asgard) and the strongest giantess, who was called Hyrrokin, and who used to ride on a wolf with vipers as reins, offered to haul the boat into the sea. She tugged at the stern of the boat, and it came free with a jerk; flames leaped out of its bottom planks and the earth trembled. Thor was so angry that he would have smashed her skull if the others hadn't held him back. He raised Mjollnir and consecrated the pyre. In his eagerness to take part, one of the dwarfsmiths bustled around his feet, and Thor landed him a kick that sent him flying into the fire.

It was not only the gods who grieved over Balder. From

Hlidskjalf, Odin could see that there was universal mourning over Balder's death both in Midgard and Utgard, and he drew his own conclusions. Everything that had sworn not to harm Balder was grieving because it had been to no avail.

When Hermod returned from Hel and said that the goddess of death would release Balder if the whole world were to unite in sorrow over his death and in the desire to get him back, the gods almost thought that the great misfortune – the greatest that had ever been – might become a great blessing. The whole world was already united in sorrow over his death and in the desire to get him back. It was the first time the world had been united and there was no war anywhere.

But Balder did not return from the dead, even though Odin could see from Hlidskjalf that human beings and giants and animals and the earth and the trees and the stones were weeping. So he sent his flying Valkyries down to Midgard in order to find out if there were any people with such cold hearts that they didn't join in the universal mourning. One of the Valkyries discovered an old woman in a cave, who was called Thokk – she looked as hard as stone. When asked whether she felt any grief over the gentle god's death, the old woman replied that she had wept all her tears when she had lost all her sons in the war; she had only dry tears left for a god who had been killed in play.

Some thought it was she who had been the cause of Balder's not returning from Hel. Others, that it was Loki who didn't grieve over Balder and was therefore the cause of his death. For Loki hadn't shown himself since the festival in Midgard that had ended so dreadfully. He was probably hiding in some shape or other, and perhaps he had his good reasons to do so. Maybe it was he who had taken the shape of the old woman who couldn't weep over Balder.



## The Revenge of the Aesir

When the sorrow had subsided, anger broke out all over the world. The giants, who had put their trust in Balder as peacemaker, did not trust the other Aesir and prepared to take their revenge for all the chief giants Thor had slain. Odin could see their preparations for war from Hlidskjalf; once again he and the gods of war set men up against one another, and the Valkyries brought the fallen warriors up to Asgard. According to the old covenant, half of them should of course be delivered to Freyja in Folkvang, but the Aesir didn't trust her, and Odin broke the covenant and took all the warriors home to Valhalla again. Freyja and Freyr were still missed in Midgard, because they were not permitted to leave Asgard. There was no love between human beings, the fields lay barren, there was not enough for everyone and so there was plenty to wage war about; and, after Balder's death, men began once more to sacrifice to the gods of war.

The Vanir complained in the Council of the Gods that the Aesir had broken the covenant. The Aesir let them talk, and left the Holy Grove in order to hold a family council in Valhalla.

According to the law, murder had to be avenged by the

family of the murdered person, otherwise the family would lose its honor. But Balder had been killed by his own brother, and if the Aesir were to revenge themselves on Hod, who was a member of their own family, this too had to be avenged, and so on, ad infinitum – the Aesir would simply exterminate themselves.

There was only one solution to the problem – that Hod take his own life. Hod's life was no great joy to him after he had unwittingly murdered Balder – the only god who had taken care of him and confided in him. All the others avoided him and would rather have seen him dead. But Frigg would not allow Hod to do himself any harm and kept watch over him in Fensalir. For she knew – and they all knew – that Hod was not really the guilty one, but had simply been the unfortunate instrument. But so long as the guilty one had not been found and punished, part of the Aesir's wrath was nevertheless directed at Hod, who had brought shame upon them in the sight of humans in Midgard. They could only satisfy their honor by finding and punishing the criminal.

They had in fact an inkling as to who the guilty one might be. They almost accepted it as proof of his guilt that Loki had not shown up since Balder's death. Odin and Heimdall had looked for him in vain all over the world; he was very likely to be hiding in a different shape.

So the Aesir began to discuss how they should punish Loki when they eventually found him. Thor had gone out looking for him in order to smash his skull, but Tyr thought that would make his punishment all too brief. They raised their voices in anger. Odin had also told his Valkyries to fetch some ale for the exhausted gods to fortify themselves with, and perhaps one or two gods fortified themselves a bit

too much. At any rate, when Loki walked up to Valhalla in his own shape, he could hear their voices right out at the gate. The gatekeeper, whose name was Eldir, stopped him, and Loki asked:

'What kind of drunken drivel are they talking in there, the gods of victory?'

'They are talking about weapons and brave deeds in battle. They are not speaking well of you,' Eldir replied.

'Let *me* go in and look at that drinking bout. I'll turn their ale sour.'

'Nobody enters here who is not invited. Over my dead body!'

'So be it,' said Loki, and he slew Eldir the gatekeeper and clambered over him.

When the gods saw Loki enter – in his own shape, mind you, but looking wild and unkempt – the conversation stopped instantly. Loki walked in among them, sizing them up:

'Why are you sitting there tongue-tied, you surly gods? I have something to say to you. Make room at the table, you've ale aplenty.'

Bragi was the best at finding words:

'The Aesir know very well whom they wish to sit at table with. Wherever you are, there is no joy.'

'I didn't realize you'd be so joyful such a short time after Balder's death. Is it his funeral you are celebrating?'

Indeed, the gods looked as if it might be a special funeral brew they were drinking.

'Sit down then,' said Odin. 'We have something we want to ask you.'

'Thank you for the warm welcome,' said Loki. 'Cheers, everyone – all except Bragi, who isn't pleased to see me.'

'No offense meant!' said Bragi. 'I'll gladly include a verse about you when I sing in praise of the Aesir.'

'It isn't as if you have ever lacked words. Yesterday you were singing a dirge about Balder, and today you want to sing for joy. No god is as spineless as you.'

'Speak for yourself! Except that you *are* no god. Neither god nor giant can trust *you*. We can't easily forget how you wanted to carry Idun off to the giants.'

'Be quiet now, Bragi!' Idun cried.

'Much better if you do the talking, Idun,' said Loki. 'Tell them how eager you were to go out flying with me!'

Then a tremendous quarrel broke out: one As after another began to speak in order to stop Loki (who was almost bursting with wicked words), and one word led to another:

*Heimdall*: You yourself were eager enough to work for the giants – where have you been all this time? One never knows where one stands with you – whether you are friend or foe.

*Loki*: One always knows where one stands with you. You're always on duty, always on guard – is that a life for a god? You see everything. You hear everything. You understand nothing. What kind of god is he who fears everything and is always playing the fox?

*Tyr*: It can be necessary to play the fox with foxes like you. Wherever you are, there is danger afoot.

*Loki*: There was once a wolf that was a greater danger – who was it who was blind to it?

*Frigg*: You mustn't mock a god who has sacrificed one of his arms.

*Loki*: And I mustn't mock a god who has sacrificed one of his sons.

*Odin:* What are you talking about, you blasphemer?

*Loki:* It is unusual for gods to die, but soon it will become common. Only two gods have died before now. What became of your brothers, Odin – Vili and Ve?

*Frigg:* They seized power when Odin was out traveling . . .

*Loki:* . . . and seized his wife too, both of them. And when Odin returned home they disappeared without trace. If the gods are to be of only one mind, it would be best if there were only one god. Best not to give birth to god children, next best to get rid of them.

*Frigg:* If my son Thor were here he wouldn't let his mother listen to this talk.

*Loki:* And if your son Balder were here he would say the same as me.

*Frigg:* Where were you when the whole world was weeping for Balder? You weren't by any chance disguised as an old woman who wept dry tears over his death?

*Loki:* Where were you when the gods of victory were trying to harm Balder? You stood looking on and smiling, thinking it was great fun.

*Frigg:* I had sworn in the whole world – animals and men, trees and plants and stones, gods and even giants. The only one who is neither animal nor man, god nor giant, is you. You must know what kind of an arrow it was that Hod shot at Balder.

*Loki:* Who doesn't? There is a parasite, the mistletoe, which is neither tree nor plant. It cannot grow by itself, but only by twining itself around other plants. After the world was sworn in, it shot up and entwined itself like a snake around Idun's apple trees. Heimdall, who can hear the grass grow, must have heard it. Odin, who sees everything, must have seen it. Ask *them* where Hod got his arrow!



*Odin:* You seem to know more than I do!

*Loki:* It's a trifle late for you to realize that! If you, who know everything, didn't know how that game with Balder would end, then what is your knowledge worth? But if you knew how the game would end, and you yourself didn't want it to end like that, then where is your power?

The Aesir were no longer seated. They had jumped up, shouting all at once, and especially at Loki. Odin struck his spear on the ground and brought them to silence:

'If I had known what a scoundrel you were, bringing shame upon the gods, I would never have brought you to Asgard!'

*Loki:* Because I knew what a scoundrel you were, I accompanied you to Asgard in order to avert the worst. Instead of keeping the world united, you have done everything in your power to divide it. You have set gods up against giants, and you have set men up against men so that they can be slain in war and go to Valhalla and extend your army. You have set gods up against gods: that half of the battlefield I played into the hands of Freyja in Folkvang stands prepared to fight your dead warriors. How can a world endure, if everyone is against everyone else? When the whole world stood united around Balder, you let him be slain. Now your world is tottering, and you will become the prey of the serpent and the wolf.

*Tyr:* If you hadn't made an enemy of Fenrir we would have had him as a friend.

At that moment *Thor* came home, shouting:

If you hadn't made a friend of Loki, he would have been our enemy. Better a whole enemy than half a friend, better a

cool foe than a lukewarm friend. All that is evil comes from you – you who have fathered both serpent and wolf!

*Loki:* You bragging accessory for a hammer! When you sat cowering in the thumb of the glove you were not very big, you boasting pig. Of fools you have always been the biggest!

*Thor:* Of fools I have always been the biggest because I didn't smash your skull a long time ago, you half-girl, you defamer, you declaimer of duplicity, you people's repulsion, you slayer of Balder!

*Loki:* I came to make you a final offer. Your enemies will grow more powerful and you will get the worst of it. I could reduce the power of your enemies. You cannot destroy the serpent and the wolf with evil, for evil breeds evil; but I could transform them with goodness. I have now said what I came to say. I had hoped to receive the fruits of a god's wisdom in reply – not the stupidity of a hammer.

Thor reached for his hammer, but Loki had changed himself into a fly, and there were many flies in Valhalla. Thor stood there trembling with rage, hammer in hand, while other gods and goddesses were rushing around smacking at flies. But Loki was not among the flies they hit.

Loki flew as high up and as far away as a fly can. His strange nature was such that although he could easily change his shape when he was awake and in fine fettle, he had to resume it again should he feel faint or sleepy. By the time it was dark enough for him not to be seen from Hlidskjalf, he had reached the rocks beside the sea and found an empty fisherman's hut beside a torrent known as Franung's Falls. There he lay hidden that night and the following nights, but

in the daytime he used to take the shape of a salmon and go swimming in the river. Since there was nothing for him to do in the hut, and he couldn't help wondering how the Aesir would be able to catch him, he sat up one night making a net out of some linen twine the fishermen had left behind. But in order to be able to see the fine mesh he was making, he sat down, without thinking, in the moonlit doorway. Then he seemed to hear the beat of ravens' wings (ravens fly at night) and retreated into the darkness. But in the morning he heard the beat of larger wings and saw Odin's Valkyries approaching. So he slipped quickly into the river in the shape of a salmon, realizing that he wouldn't be able to return to the hut, which the Valkyries had surrounded.

Later that day Thor and Tyr arrived together with a couple of subordinate gods – Ull, god of hunting, and Vidar, god of revenge. They were accompanied by some dwarfsmiths, who had made a chain that was as strong as Gleipnir, even though Loki was not as strong as Fenrir. They entered the hut and found the net the ravens had seen Loki making, and decided to catch Loki in his own net.

The Aesir climbed up to the source of the river and cast the net into the water. Thor walked on one bank, holding one end of the net, the others on the other bank, holding the other end. Thus they could sweep the river clear of big fish. But Loki, who must have sensed how things were going to end, had slithered his way down into the mud between two stones. The Aesir felt the net touch against something living and thought it must be Loki, for there were not many big fish left in the sea or the rivers.

Then the Aesir told the dwarfs to tie something heavy onto the net so that it could scrape the bottom, and once

more they climbed up to the source and swept the river. In this way they chased Loki out toward the ocean. They knew as well as he did that this was perilous for him, because when he was tired he was obliged to change back into his own shape, and in that shape he was not such a good swimmer as he was in his salmon-skin. When Loki saw the net approaching in the water, he had the choice of fleeing out into the ocean and disappearing, or jumping over the net. He chose the latter and swam up toward the source again. Perhaps he hoped he could get up on land and change into a fly or something, but the problem was that he couldn't change his shape directly from salmon into fly, but only by way of his own shape, and in this he would be an easy target.

The Aesir had seen him jump, and knew what he had in mind. They walked back with the net once more, but this time Thor let the others carry it while he himself waded out into the river, hammer in hand. Since Loki didn't dare change his shape, he had no choice but to jump over the net again. He mustered all his strength and jumped high up over the edge of the net. Thus Thor had enough time to grab him. To be sure, Loki was as slippery as a fish and almost slipped out of Thor's hand, but Thor squeezed him tight and got hold of his tail fin, almost tearing it. Quickly, he slapped the fish's head against a stone and stunned it, and then entwined it in the net. As it lay there wriggling its tail, it changed back into the Loki whose appearance they knew all too well – but he was still stunned by the blow.

They dragged him into a rocky cave, and the dwarf-smiths bored holes into three craggy boulders to which they fastened the chain. As soon as the Aesir had bound Loki to the boulders – one under his shoulders, one under his loins, and the other under his knees – Loki woke up

from his stupor and immediately set up a terrifying and pitiful howl – as if he were neither god nor giant but an animal. He howled at the top of his voice that if they didn't let him go the giants would come and avenge him – and it would be the downfall of the gods. But they were no longer to be persuaded, however loudly he howled. They brought out a poisonous snake they had caught for this very purpose, and fastened it to the ceiling of the rocky cave so that its venom dripped down onto his face and seared it – and Loki roared even louder. Letting him roar, they left the cave. They had avenged Balder's death and satisfied the honor of the gods.

Later on, a woman entered the cave; she had heard the bellowing and couldn't stand the sound. She brought with her a bowl, which she held under the snake so that the poison no longer dripped onto Loki – who stopped bellowing. Only when the bowl was full and she had to go outside and empty it did the drops of poison fall upon him. Then he howled and writhed so violently that the boulders to which he was fastened shook with him. He was beside himself with pain and could no longer speak – in his delirium he thought he saw Freyja before him and couldn't understand it.





## The Revenge of the Giants

Everything shakes, everything shakes apart.

A wolf so big that its gaping jaws can bridge earth and heaven is swallowing the sun.

A serpent so huge that it fills the entire ocean ranges up over land, spewing venom and fire, so the earth starts to burn.

In Asgard the ash tree is torn loose by quakes and set on fire, its blazing branches spreading all over the world and tearing down the stars.

Heimdall sounds his horn, louder than the thunder of heaven, the warriors from Valhalla stagger out on to the Plain of Ida; but giant birds, winged reptiles, and fiery dragons fill the air and swoop down on the plain, alighting on the warriors and crushing them to death.

Down in Midgard people swarm out like ants from devastated anthills, the army of giants advances over them and up the rainbow, which collapses behind them.

The wolf strides up into Asgard, and the serpent rises up on its tail, buries its fangs in Odin's Hlidskjalf, and hauls itself up.

The mighty gods are very small; they stand like black shadows against the burning sky.

Odin hurls his spear at the wolf, which swallows the spear and Odin with it.

Tyr raises his arm against the wolf, but it is his left arm; his right arm is missing, and now he loses the left one too.

Freyr fences in vain with the towering giants.

Thor hurls his hammer at the serpent and smashes its head; the venom gushes out of it, and Thor reels and falls to the ground.

The ash tree has turned into smoke, Asgard turns into smoke, the ocean washes up over Midgard.

The giant birds rise up, their wings afire, and vanish like sparks in the smoke.



## Afterword

The Norse myths are not so well known or loved as the Greek myths. Originating in a harsher climate, their main theme is the war between the gods and the frost giants that culminates in *ragnarök* – an Old Icelandic word meaning ‘the doom of the powers.’ Gods who are fighting for their survival have less time for love and merrymaking than the Greek gods; they are not so omnipotent, but may for that very reason be more human. When reading the old Icelandic poets we can feel that they were already writing about our own problems – feel glad that they were already so wise in those days and regret that we have not become appreciably wiser in the meantime.

Our knowledge of the Norse myths comes from both the *Elder Edda* – a collection of skaldic poems by unknown authors – and the *Younger Edda* – a collection of stories and poetic rules by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson. The themes dealt with in the two *Eddas* are largely the same; both works originate from the thirteenth century, though they are based on a much older oral tradition. It is significant in this respect that Iceland adopted Christianity in A.D. 1000: thus the poets who retold the heathen myths – and possibly left their mark on them – were Christian.

According to one common theory, true myth is 'the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime' of a cultic drama (Robert Graves). The purpose of the drama was to increase fertility and safeguard the universal order, or cosmos, from the threat of chaos. A similar ritual core is also discernible in the Norse mythology: the Asgard of the gods corresponds to cosmos, the Utgard of the frost giants to chaos, which must be held at bay with constant effort. The fair Balder is a sun god who succumbs in Ragnarok, the annual death of nature, only to rise again in the spring. In the *Elder Edda's* longest and most obscure poem a new world – 'Gimle' – comes into being after the end of the old one. The conceptions of Ragnarok and Gimle may also have been inspired by Christianity: 'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.' (Revelation 21:1)

But the myths may be seen in a social as well as a cosmic perspective: they arose in a society in which family honor demanded revenge for every injustice, and for every act of vengeance too. If the contending families were to live together in one society, a different morality and a different sense of justice were needed: this constituted the social background for the triumph of Christianity.

For centuries the heathen myths were solely interpreted as the testimony of a barbaric past. It was the romantic poets at the beginning of the nineteenth century who rediscovered them and made them known to a wider public. In Denmark N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) published his *North-ern Mythology* (1808) with its entirely new interpretation of the myths. They were not 'an uncurbed figment of the imagination, but glorious and meaningful poetry originat-

ing in the irresistible urge to solve the mystery of life.' They were concerned not only with the past but with the eternally human. Grundtvig interpreted the war between the gods and the giants as the fight of the spirit against the baser side of human nature – as culture's perpetual fight against barbarity.

Interpreted thus, the myths could also become a weapon in an ideological dispute which became especially associated with the newly created Folk High Schools which Grundtvig also initiated. Unlike the grammar schools with their Latin education, these set out to teach the people – that is, the peasants and their children – practical skills and to give them 'enlightenment for life' into the bargain.

Great emphasis was placed on Christian teaching and national feeling – on Scripture and Danish history: for Grundtvig and his successors there was no difference between being a Christian or a human being – or between the Bible and the *Eddas*: both reflected the same spiritual struggle. The Folk High Schools set just as great store by the imagination as by the intellect. Essential to their teaching, therefore, was the narrative, or 'living word': legends and fairy tales, but especially the Norse myths.

The inspiration from the Folk High Schools and hence from mythology had a great bearing on the work of national regeneration in Denmark after her defeat in 1864 in the war against Prussia. After the national Ragnarok came a 'Gimle' – and it seemed natural to identify the frost giants with the Prussians!

In Denmark, Grundtvig's conception of the myths predominated until our own time, though it remained unknown outside Scandinavia.

In the years after World War II, the interest in Norse

mythology has been less pronounced, at any rate outside Grundtvigian circles. The use, or misuse, of Nordic symbols and Norse mythology – and of Richard Wagner's operas – by the Third Reich reflected back on the myths themselves, in Scandinavia as well as the rest of Europe.

It was through Richard Wagner and his *Der Ring des Nibelungen* that Norse mythology became known to a large international public. It is important to remember, however, that Wagner based his work just as much on the *Völsunga Saga* as on the *Eddas*. In *The Ring* it is human beings and not gods who take the center stage: it is not the death of the good god Balder but of the hero Siegfried which leads to catastrophe. The main theme is not the struggle between the gods and the giants (the giants *have* already been defeated) but between those in power (the gods) and their oppressed subjects (the Nibelungs), and especially the conflict between love and lust for power in both rulers and subjects. Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (the German word for Ragnarok) is the judgment over a world founded on power and oppression. Wagner conceived his work in 1848, the year of the Dresden uprising.

'The incomparable nature of the myth is not only that it is true at any time, but that its contents, however closely condensed, remain inexhaustible for all time,' Wagner wrote. But in the myth, every age discovers – or places – its own content, and Wagner's own 'revolutionary' myth has had many widely differing interpretations from 1876 (the year in which *The Ring* was first performed) until today. The traditional – and especially the Nazi – conception of Wagner, with its cultivation of the Teutonic and the heroic, was radically revised after 1945, both in Wagner's own Bay-

reuth and elsewhere, including Århus, Jutland, where during the 1980s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was performed in its entirety for the first time in Denmark since 1912.

In 1981, in the same month, I was asked to write some program articles for the Danish production of *The Ring* – and to retell the Norse mythology in modern language. It was a curious coincidence, even more so because I happened at that time to be reading Grundtvig's mythology – for the first time since my youth. It was inspiring to compare the versions of my famous predecessors with the *Eddas* themselves – and especially inspiring to discover that the source was not exhausted. The task of revising the traditional German conception of Wagner proved to be no less than that of revising the traditional Danish interpretation of the *Eddas*. Their main theme is and remains the fight between gods and giants (Wagner's Nibelungs came from a different source), but Wagner was not the first to emphasize the conflict between power and love: the poets responsible for the *Eddas* did so too.

The *Eddas* relate that there had once been two warring families of gods: the Aesir and the Vanir, who eventually became reconciled. Whereas the Aesir were rulers and warriors (Odin and Frigg, Thor and Tyr), the Vanir were gods of love and fertility (Njord, Freyr, and Freyja). Thus together they make up the three divine functions which the French mythologist Georges Dumézil asserts as being common to all Indo-European mythologies; in the history of religion, however, the Vanir may also represent a primeval farming culture, the Aesir – nomadic conquerors. In the *Eddas* it is scarcely accidental that the Vanir, Njord and Freyr, marry giant girls and that the giants are particularly interested in

Freyja, goddess of love; it shows that war is not the only possible attitude to take to the frost giants, a point I emphasize in this book.

But my chief characters are Balder and Loki. Loki is the most original figure in Norse mythology; he does not fit into Dumézil's triad and has no parallels elsewhere – though it is worth noting that he shares the same fate as that of the Greek Prometheus. To begin with, Loki may simply have been a trickster and become demonized during the course of time. In the *Younger Edda* it is he who instigates the death of Balder, although there is reason to believe that he had originally had nothing to do with the Balder myth. Presumably, in their conception of Balder and Loki the *Eddas* were already influenced by Christian moral dualism, and this became even more pronounced during the Romantic era. I attach importance to the fact that Loki, who is himself both giant and god, must be personally interested in fighting the dualistic tendency to divide the world up into gods and giants, into friends and foes.

Snorri Sturluson says of Balder that he is the wisest of the gods, 'but that it is one of his characteristics that none of his decisions can be fulfilled' – a bitter commentary on the relation between justice and power and between wisdom and action. In his fear of evil the good Balder may be especially vulnerable to it – perhaps that is humanism's essential problem?

The book *Ragnarok* was well received in the Scandinavian countries (though the Swedish critic who reviewed it under the headline 'Good-bye Wagner!' was exaggerating slightly!). Many people felt as I did: that the old myths were surprisingly topical, especially when divorced from the ro-

mantic interpretation. The latter, however, called forth violent protests on the part of Folk High School teachers who still embraced Grundtvig's interpretation. To them it was almost blasphemous to see Odin portrayed as a kind of dictator, Thor as a militarist, Heimdal as a kind of Secret Service agent, and especially the wicked Loki as a rebel with a cause. I had abolished the distinction between good and evil, they said, and I had deprived human beings of hope by not letting Gimle follow Ragnarok. I myself thought I had called into question the distinction between the good (us) and the wicked (the others): evil is evil, even when exercised by 'us gods.' The *Eddas* seem to me to say the same, and therefore they have a message for us; they deal with the events leading to Ragnarok, not with those leading to Gimle.

Thus the old myths still give rise to heated discussion – a proof that they are not merely concerned with the past. Myths are true at any time, but in every age their truth has to be interpreted and reassimilated.

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